Smiley plan for hotel hygiene

New Delhi: India's food safety regulator is preparing to certify hygiene levels of large and small restaurants across the country through a mix of smileys and stickers to provide guidance to consumers.

The Food Safety Standards Authority of India plans to introduce later this year a voluntary rating system to promote self-compliance of food hygiene and safety among restaurants and inform consumers about hygiene quality in the eateries, FSSAI officials said.

The hygiene rating scheme will encourage voluntary "responsible behaviour" among restaurants through activities beyond statutory requirements, examining diverse practices - from the proportion of healthy dishes on the menu to how waiters hold water glasses before setting them on a table.

"This plan is under an advanced stage of development - it will provide fair and objective ratings done by experts," Pawan Kumar Aggarwal, the FSSAI's chief executive officer, told The Telegraph.

The regulatory agency will also provide a website link that will allow consumers to scrutinise ratings that restaurants have earned.

The restaurants will be assessed on core statutory requirements, the presence of trained food safety supervisors on their premises, nutritious offerings on the menu and measures to promote hygienic and wholesome eating habits among customers, among other parameters, an FSSAI official said.

The scores the restaurants earn will be translated into a maximum of five smileys. "Our research suggests that our population connects with emojis a lot, so we plan to use these icons as indicators of hygiene ratings," an official who is associated with the scheme told this newspaper.

The FSSAI also plans to introduce a hygiene-plus rating initiative to assess restaurants on activities beyond just food hygiene and safety.

A restaurant that offers grilled or roasted chicken on its menu instead of fried chicken alone is likely to gain more scores under the hygiene-plus rating, as will a restaurant that has an open or transparent kitchen, handles water safely and donates surplus food, the official said.

The hygiene-plus scores will be represented through stickers that the restaurant could display on their premises.

The agency has already rolled out an experimental "pilot" scheme for restaurants in New Delhi and the programme is expected to be expanded across the country later this year, the official said. While restaurants and hotels are already assessed by consumer groups and private entities, the FSSAI rating is expected to carry greater credence.
"This is not unique to India - other countries have similar rating programmes," Aggarwal said. England, Wales and Northern Ireland, for instance, have a Food Hygiene Rating System, while Australia has a "scores on doors" rating system.

The National Restaurant Association of India, a body of about 5,500 restaurants, express food outlets and kiosks across the country, is examining the proposals for the rating scheme.

"This is a work in progress - we just learnt about it a few weeks back and our members are examining it to provide feedback," Prakul Kumar, secretary-general of the NRAI, said.

The hygiene rating system will not cover street food vendors and food sold on wheeled carts, an FSSAI official said. "The challenges in that sector are quite different and we have other plans to address them."