A weak food chain

Recent controversy points to poor regulation

The overseas controversy over the presence of carcinogenic pesticide in two popular Indian spice brands presents another reminder of the poor standards of the country's foods and drugs regulation. Earlier this week, Hong Kong and Singapore, two geographies with substantial Indian populations, banned the sale of spice brands MDH and Everest. The ban followed a report from Hong Kong's Centre for Food Safety, highlighting the presence of ethylene oxide in three spice mixes from MDH and one from Everest as part of a routine surveillance exercise. This is not the first time that Indian food brands have been hauled up by regulatory authorities of other countries. Last year, the United States Food and Drug Administration ordered a recall of MDH food products after they tested positive for salmonella. With India being the world's largest exporter of spices, the commerce ministry has sought details of the reports from Singapore and Hong Kong and started inspections at exporter facilities. At the same time, the Spices Board has put in place mandatory ethylene oxide residue-testing systems for spice consignments destined for Singapore and Hong Kong.

This is becoming a familiar routine. Independent entities such as non-government organisations and influencers or regulatory and testing authorities in other countries discover transgressions in Indian food and medicine products that have passed muster with Indian regulators. For instance, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) swung into action only after a Swiss investigative organisation by the name Public Eye revealed that foods multinational Nestle added extra sugar to baby foods its sold in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (although, in a rare instance of proactive vigilance, it did haul up the same company for the presence of lead in its popular Maggi instant noodle brand in 2015). Recently, following the revelations of an influencer, the FSSAI cautioned e-commerce sites from listing products such as Bournvita from the health-drinks/energy-drinks category. That diktat followed an investigation by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights that found that Bournvita, which has targeted children for years, contained sugar levels much above acceptable limits. Last year, Indian-made cough syrups allegedly caused the deaths of at least 140 children in the Gambia, Cameroon, and Uzbekistan. It is small wonder, then, that the Supreme Court, hearing the case of misleading advertisements by the Patanjali group, directed the Union government to take action against other fast-moving consumer goods companies, especially those with products targeting children and babies, indulging in false campaigns.

The failure of domestic regulation is linked to public-health issues and the prospects for the food-processing industry. As India has moved up the income chain, the processed-food business has been steadily expanding. The sector has been growing in double digits since 2018, a development that demands robust standards and regulation. The fact that India is a growing centre for juvenile diabetes, for instance, should encourage the FSSAI to tighten sugar content in processed foods and snacks. Equally, the abundance of India's agri-produce offers enormous potential for export. The presence of carcinogens and other unhealthy ingredients in Indian food exports is unlikely to enhance the prospects of overseas sales, especially at a time when key markets are raising non-tariff barriers. Processed-food exports are growing at a healthy pace and the upside potential is huge. Only regulations that match best-in-class global standards can ensure that outcome.