

Greater Kashmir

We are what we eat

Our food chain has got polluted as a number of toxic substances have made an entry into it



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Food is a necessity for all living organisms. Safe food is essential for safe survival. It is an important public concern. Keeping food safe is a long and complex process that starts from the farm and ends with the consumer. A long trail of carriers and auxiliaries is involved before it reaches the end users. Various national and the international institutions related to fields of foodsafety /sciences/technology/information/administration/protection/research etc, almost share similar views regarding the meaning of food safety.

It is taken to mean proper handling, preparation, storage, distribution, manufacturing, carriage in a way that prevents food borne illness caused by bacteria, fungi, parasites, microbes and viruses. The occurrence of two or more cases of similar illness resulting from the ingestion of common food is construed as food borne disease. Producers and manufacturers, however, play an all important role in its safety.

As safe food is directly related to good health. For ensuring food safety, sanitary and hygienic conditions of the food establishments are equally important. Any inverse element bears inverse results. Our food chain has got polluted as a number of toxic substances have entered it which tell upon health of people as well as animals. Food includes fruits, milk , oils, drinks , poultry & vegetables also.

In agriculture fields and the orchards where food is grown, use of excessive, adulterated/substandard, unwanted pesticides, insecticides, herbicides, toxic chemicals, unscheduled sprays, vermicides etc, effect the food, fruits and vegetables contaminating food stuff for animals also. The recent malady of the use of chemicals that cause premature ripening/colouring/ increase in volume makes it further deleterious. The addition of preservatives aimed to increase the shelf life of food products is also not risk free. Then there is willful adulteration of foreign matter in liquid and dry foods/spices by ghoulish minds purely goaded by wild capitalistic mindset.

Chemicals increasing colour and flavor are added to make feasts/dishes tasty to tongue & nose which is lethal for health. The foods and also goods transported through road, sea, and air network carriers too are vulnerable to hazards of normal pollution and mishandling, making it unsafe. The poultry industry has also fallen prey to criminal activity as these innocents are being fed with chemical feeds and injected with liquids to grow in weight unnaturally in a short span of time. Such actions facilitate increased chances for food borne pathogens fatal to human health. The open secret of food adulteration is not a new event in Jammu & Kashmir.

The phenomenal increase witnessed since recent past which has led to rise in number of patients suffering from gastric and other stomach disorders is quite worrisome and painful. Now the concept of food fortification is made to make its debut in Jammu & Kashmir. Food fortification means addition of key vitamins and minerals such as Iron, Iodine, Zinc, Vitamins A & D to staple foods such as rice, wheat, oil, milk and salt to improve their nutritional content.

The authorities concerned say that these nutrients may or may not have been originally present in the food before processing or may have been lost during processing. Hope that this food fortification works and does not open another avenue for miscreants.

Consequent upon multiplicity of news reports about unrestrained food adulteration, the Hon'ble High Court of Jammu & Kashmir took a sou-moto cognizance of the reports and treated these as Public Interest Litigation in 2016 so as to help reinforce accountability and action.

Meanwhile during 2016-17 to 2108-19 about 10,636 food samples were randomly picked up from various markets of J & K for testing compliance with Food Safety and Standards Act 2006.

About 26 percent of these samples were found adulterated and sub-standard calling in question the work of service providers and the food safety authorities. Year-wise break-up of the data is tabulated below:-

Year.	Number of random food samples picked.	Number of samples found adulterated/sub-standard or violating safety standards.	Number of cases lodged.	Number of cases convicted	Percentage of convictions to samples picked up	Percentage of convictions to number of cases lodged.
2016-17	2,952	1,114	635	1		
2017-18	3,643	992	921	310		
2018-19	4,041	701	698	nil		
Total	10,636	2,807	2,254	311	11.07	13.79

The low percentage of convictions with respect to picked up and the lodged cases indicates that everything is not hunky-dory with the department /organization concerned. The slack delayed action emboldens, and increases the number of violators and the violations.

Jammu & Kashmir Drug & Food Control Organisation has been entrusted with the work of ensuring that foods, vegetables, fruits etc, which enter their jurisdiction from other parts of the country are checked, so that safe things reach consumers. Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, an autonomous body established under Food Safety and Standards Act 2006 with the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare(GOI) prescribes food safety standards and regulations. The Authority says that it has laid down food safety standards and regulations to ensure that safe food reaches consumers but the implementation and enforcement of these regulations lies with the State/Union Territory Governments for which it has reminded them from time to time to conduct regular inspections and take penal actions wherever needed. The onus lies with the State/Union Territory Governments. Lax laws, unwise decisions, un-matching penal action, partial execution, undesired influences, less and little feed back from people have also added to the problem. Food adulteration is a heinous crime than giving short measurements or little weights as former attacks doubly on health and money.

It is an undeclared clandestine war against people to be fought valiantly, till it is won. Adulteration being a sin, a moral transgression, offence under rule, crime under law and socially unacceptable act, needs to be dealt in its entirety. It is not strange we fall ill, stranger is that we survive when our medicines too are adulterated, which is another calamity. Effective action at governmental, non –governmental and civil society level is to be taken along with regular awareness programmes conducted for the consumers to arrest this trend.