VIEWS | FROM THE EDITOR

Still a long way?

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still-a-long-way

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On directions from the Central government, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has given one more extension of six months to food business operators (FBOs) for mandatory licence/registration. This is the fifth extension granted since the first deadline of February 2012. The entire process of registration of all FBOs or obtaining licence by them has extended beyond three years now.

One can understand the hiccups in the process as it is a gigantic task to register or give licences to each food business operator – from corporates to roadside vendors. Corporates, companies and other organised sector are not a problem, but small companies in the unorganised sector, and more than that, every person selling some food item on roadside is a real problem.
According to FSSAI estimate, of the total FBOs nearly 90% are from unorganised sector. That is a huge number, particularly when the universe itself is not known exactly, and reaching to each one of them is a challenge. And it is essential to do that as a first step towards safe food even on road.

FSSAI could register only 30,000 FBOs in the three years. But since the task was assigned to state governments also 30 lakh FBOs have been registered, FSSAI Chairman Chandramouli had said some time back in Chennai. He also accepted that FSSAI could not quantify the exact numbers. Thus, it appears that much more work still remains to be done, requiring repeated extensions.

Non-registration of large number of FBOs even after three years is not the only challenge FSSAI is facing. Its several decisions are perceived as controversial by the industry and many of them are challenged in different courts across the country and are pending at varied legal levels and stages. Codex harmonisation was also delayed little more than expectation, but on track now, in process, and expected to be completed by year end.

Amidst all these issues, the organisation is now without a permanent head. After Chairman K Chandramouli’s term expired last month temporary charge was given to the then Public Health

Secretary. Later, the secretary was transferred and the temporary charge is now with the new secretary for two months, while search for a new chairman is on.

But, the issue is when Chandramouli’s date of stepping down was known in advance, why the government failed to appoint the incumbent before that. When there are issues pending, not having a permanent head for the organization further delays the work and process.

Any new regulatory needs time to establish processes, as was evident in electricity. Food safety is a more sensitive issue, naturally taking more time. But, as it is more sensitive, it also requires to be established as fast as possible. All actions of FSSAI hereafter are needed to be with that pace keeping in mind the sensitivity of the subject and delays till now.

Going by the series of extensions to registration process and decisions pending in courts, one wonders when one could see light at the end of the tunnel whose length keeps on extending. Or should we take it that the light is put off till informed otherwise?

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