

Food Policy and the Pursuit of Safety

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<p>As World Food Safety Day approaches on June 7, policymakers, scientists, and citizens are once again reminded of an uncomfortable truth—food safety in India remains a fragile guarantee. The 2025 theme, “<i>Food Safety: Science in Action</i>”, is not merely a call to laboratories or food scientists but a signal to policymakers to translate technical knowledge into everyday safeguards. It is, in essence, a reminder that policy inertia can be as dangerous as pathogens.</p> <p>Why Food Safety Deserves More Than a Day</p> <p>Foodborne diseases affect an estimated 600 million people globally each year, with over 120,000 of them being children under five (WHO, 2023). In India, the burden is aggravated by a complex and fragmented food supply chain—one that moves from unregulated street vendors to industrial processors, often slipping past regulatory oversight. Unsafe food not only compromises health but also hits the poorest hardest, exacerbating inequality in both nutrition and opportunity. While food safety is routinely mistaken as a matter of consumer hygiene or refrigeration, its roots lie deeper—in public policy, scientific governance, and regulatory enforcement.</p> <p>India’s Regulatory Landscape</p> <p>India’s central food safety authority, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), was set up under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. While the Act was envisioned as a comprehensive umbrella law, its actual impact has been varied. The FSSAI has laid down hundreds of standards and advisories, but enforcement at the state level remains patchy.</p> <p>In cities like Lucknow and Varanasi, recent drives against food adulteration have resulted in ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns, with offenders’ identities made public (Times of India, 2025). Yet, experts warn that such symbolic actions cannot substitute for systemic reform. Food testing laboratories remain under-equipped. The ratio of food safety officers to the population is abysmal—roughly one officer per 1.5 lakh citizens in several states, as per the CAG report (2022). Moreover, food safety doesn’t end at pesticide residues or adulterants. It includes packaging safety, cold chain reliability, labelling compliance, and, crucially, transparency.</p>	<p>Policy vs Practice</p> <p>Take the example of fortified foods. India’s push for iron and folic acid-fortified staples—rice and wheat—has raised eyebrows among scientists and civil society groups. While fortification is seen as a quick solution to anemia, concerns have emerged about risks of overconsumption and bioavailability, especially when administered through the public distribution system (PDS). As food policy analyst Dr. Veena Shatrugna noted in a <i>The Wire</i> interview, “We are distributing the same solution to everyone without knowing who needs it, who doesn’t, and who might be harmed.”</p> <p>Even well-meaning schemes can flounder when divorced from ground realities. A recent recommendation by Karnataka’s Food Safety Commission to cut rice allocations under the Anna Bhagya scheme cited concerns of adulteration, poor storage, and under-utilisation (Times of India, 2025). Such cases show how food policy, even when driven by welfare objectives, can falter due to structural lapses in food safety.</p> <p>Global Frameworks, Local Failures</p> <p>Globally, food safety is governed by institutions like the Codex Alimentarius Commission and standards like ISO 22000, which offer guidance on hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP). India is a Codex member and has aligned many of its domestic standards accordingly. But the real test is implementation. As trade expands, ensuring traceability becomes critical. Recent alerts by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) on salmonella in frozen poultry products or the FDA’s crackdown on imported seafood have highlighted how breaches in one part of the supply chain ripple across borders. India’s food exports have not been immune. The European Union, on multiple occasions, has raised red flags on Indian basmati rice, mangoes, and seafood—often citing pesticide levels or hygiene lapses.</p> <p>Science, Not Slogans</p> <p>The science of food safety is not new—but its application remains selective. World Food Safety Day’s theme this year—“<i>Science in Action</i>”—is a quiet reprimand to governments and corporations that trumpet technology but ignore its consistent use. As Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, former Chief Scientist at WHO,</p>
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has often said, “Science doesn’t work in bursts. It works in systems.” India needs a science-led national policy on food safety that is decentralised yet accountable. More investment in accredited labs, real-time tracking of food consignments, and predictive AI models to detect food fraud patterns are urgently required. A digitally empowered FSSAI must become less reactive and more preventive.

The Role of Citizens and Civil Society

While the state must lead, the citizen cannot be passive. Consumer awareness is woefully inadequate. A 2023 NIN survey in Telangana found that only 17% of respondents could identify the FSSAI logo, and fewer still understood expiry dates. Campaigns must move beyond television jingles to classroom curriculums and ration shops. Social media has emerged as both a tool and a trap—viral videos of street food hygiene violations prompt outrage, but often lead to unverified claims and harassment of small vendors. Striking a balance between education and enforcement remains key.

A Quiet Crisis or a Loud Opportunity

In the post-COVID era, food safety is not just about hygiene—it’s about trust. It’s about knowing that the milk your child drinks, or the rice on your plate, won’t endanger your health. The policy gaps are well known. The science is well established. What remains is the political and administrative will to act—not episodically, but structurally.

As World Food Safety Day nears, we must remind ourselves that the safety of what we eat is a public right, not a private privilege. And unless food policy becomes more than a compilation of regulations—unless it becomes a lived, enforceable, equitable system—the very notion of “safe food” will remain a slogan.

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