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Economy apart, there are other reasons to believe why we are not living in the best of times



An estimated 76 million Americans, a quarter of the population, contract food-borne illness each year in the backdrop of contamination scares

Kiran Yadav

IGNORANCE can really be bliss. Ask S Dave, Director, Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority. If you were to exchange places with him, you'd know what it means to have sleepless nights. He sums up his predicament in a single question that he once happened to ask his neighbourhood vegetable vendor—"why is your stock more expensive than the next guy's, is it more fresh?" Dave had only expected part of the answer. The vendor would have obviously said "yes, the vegetables are fresh." It was the other part that took Dave with unpleasant surprise. "I plucked it just this afternoon and sprayed it well with medicine. You will not find even a single germ sir," the vendor said proudly yet innocently defending his higher prices on the grounds of the amount of money he had invested in lacing them with chemicals!

For a man who knows the permissible limits of each pesticide, the pre harvest intervals that need to be maintained in each case and also the dimensions of the nozzle hole of the sprayer, we can imagine it to be no less than 'shock and awe.' How else would you put it for a man who strongly argues that the stalk of the apple should be a key indicator of its standard. You'd ask why? "Removing the stalk leaves a tiny hole in the apple, making it susceptible to contamina-

tion and decay," says Dave.

Not that the picture is any brighter internationally. The world's largest cereal maker, Kellogg, was in news recently for the wrong reasons. After distributing snacks with tainted ingredients from Peanut Corp of America, it not only commissioned a study to check its safety and testing procedures but reportedly even contemplated making its own peanut butter after a recall that is estimated to have cost the food brand a whopping \$70 million. The scare came shortly after the China melamine scandal—with the industrial chemical found in everything from infant formula, eggs to animal feed. The enormity of its impact on the food chain, a near-impossible task, is yet to be ascertained in absolute terms.

Life inorganic

While millions of Indians may still be counting their blessings, most can't deny battling a constant, nagging doubt of pesticide residues in the platter. And the sheer helplessness of the situation—given that there is neither a way to find out the degree of contamination in the produce, nor is it possible for all to maintain a kitchen garden, or even afford the organic variety regularly—only makes it pertinent to ask if anything that we eat (fresh, packed or processed) is safe at all?

The only option we thus have is "to be on our guard" because we are far from even coming close to the stringent

At your end

- Bacteria in food grow and reproduce fast within dangerous temperature zone from 4° to 63° degree C. Always keep raw meat and perishable food below 4°C, cold foods cold (at 4°C or below); hot foods hot (at 63°C or above).
- Prevent cross-contamination of food during storage.
- Perishable food should not be stored too long in refrigerator because refrigeration only slows down bacterial growth but does not kill bacteria.
- Cut chunky food (meat) into smaller pieces before cooking thaw frozen vegetables, meat and poultry thoroughly before cooking. Cooking temperature may not be sufficient to kill all micro organisms if all parts are not completely thawed.

food safety laws practised in Europe or say US. So, while you may not be even able to trace the spinach you buy from your neighbourhood vendor to its source, a customer in Europe can access the entire information for the grapes imported from India. Euro Fruits, for instance, has to commit 100% plot-to-punnet and block-to-box traceability information on all its products. The Maharashtra-based company has been

exporting table grapes to European markets since 1993. "Right from produce procurement, traceability, sampling, to residues testing we maintain all the protocols," says Nitin Agrawal, MD, Euro Fruits.

Fair deal?

Unfortunately, a customer in India has no access to any such information with respect to imports. Experts hint at products unsafe for consumption by the developed world being dumped by in the developing countries. "In terms of safety there should not be any divide between domestic and imported food. Moreover, there are food safety standards like Codex and PFA in place. The problem is that there is no benchmark for the domestic produce," defends Sumit Saran, SCS Group, India. And he has plenty of figures to back his argument. The market for the imported food products and fresh fruit stands at more than 1.1 billion per annum and is growing steadily. Apple imports, for example, have increased from 5,000 metric tonnes in 2001 to 55,000 metric tonnes in 2008. However, according to trade estimates, 30-40% of this volume is still routed through the grey market. "Consumers must look at labels carefully—not at the date of import but at the date of manufacture. And always buy from organised retail as far as possible," adds Saran.

Dave too feels the same about domestic produce: "Organised retail sector

must develop a mechanism to source only safe produce. There should be a accredited body to certify the same." A practical solution indeed given the fact that the task of targeting the crores of farmers in the country and ensure that they follow fair agricultural practices is enormous.

"Till that happens the consumer can "check out if the packaged food they buy has been irradiated," says Dr Ashutosh Shukla, Head, Internal Medicine, Artemis Health Institute. Irradiation treats certain types of foods with ionising energy or radiation. The process primarily helps in conserving food and maintaining hygiene. Dr Shukla comes across several acute gastroenteritis cases each day that manifests in the form of loose motion, vomiting, nausea etc. Pointing at common food poisoning bugs like Salmonella, E Coli, he adds that cooked food should not be left outside for more than two hours and cut fruit must be consumed within 15 minutes! "There are outbreaks off and on and it is important to trace the food to the source of contamination. Products from unknown sources are best avoided," asserts Dr Susham Sharma, Internal Medicine, Max Healthcare in Delhi.

Well, that's the advice we can arm ourselves with while we wait for the Food Safety Authority to make our platter safer for consumption. After all ignorance, in such matters, really cannot be considered bliss.