

Politics on Plate: Food Standards, Governance and the Health Welfare of Citizens in India

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Abstract- Food regulation in India sits at the intersection of governance, politics, and public health, and this relationship directly shapes the quality of food available to consumers as well as the credibility of the systems meant to protect them. This study examines how governance influences both the making and enforcement of food safety policy, with particular attention to adulteration, contamination, and misleading labelling, all of which continue to pose serious risks to public health. Although the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India was established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 to create a more integrated regulatory framework, the continued adulteration of everyday products such as milk, spices, and edible oils shows that enforcement still falls short in practice. These violations do not just lower food quality; they also expose consumers to poisoning, malnutrition, and long-term lifestyle related diseases. The issue, then, is not only about law on paper but about a wider governance gap shaped by political interference, corruption, weak infrastructure, limited staffing, under equipped laboratories, and delays in legal adjudication. At the same time, fragmented accountability, overlaps between central and state agencies, and poor public access to regulatory data reduce transparency and weaken public trust. By combining legislative analysis, regulatory evaluation, and political economy, this research argues for stronger implementation, better institutional capacity, digital monitoring, and more open data systems so that food safety standards can translate into real consumer protection.

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, food is often, spoken of as culture, memory, livelihood, ritual, agriculture, and identity, but it is just as importantly a question of power, regulation, and everyday citizenship, because what reaches the plate is never only the result of private choice or market exchange, it is also the result of legal standards, administrative vigilance, public institutions, and the quality of state responsibility that stands behind the ordinary act of eating. In that sense, food safety is not a narrow technical branch of public

administration but one of the clearest places where the promises of governance become intimate, bodily, and unavoidable. A person can postpone many interactions with the state, but no one can postpone food for long, and this is precisely why the governance of food carries unusual moral and political weight in a country as vast, unequal, and institutionally diverse as India. The issue becomes sharper because modern food systems are not transparent to those who depend on them. Consumers generally cannot see how ingredients were sourced, whether storage conditions were hygienic, whether contamination entered during transport, whether additives exceeded lawful limits, whether labels tell the truth, or whether testing and enforcement ever reached the point where the product first entered circulation. They consume, therefore, in trust, and the daily routine of trust is sustained not by individual inspection but by the architecture of law, standards, licensing, laboratories, surveillance, and public authority that claims to secure safe and wholesome food for human consumption. Once that claim is made, food safety stops being a small regulatory concern and becomes a serious test of the state itself. It becomes a test of whether institutions can convert legal promise into material protection, whether markets can be disciplined in the public interest, and whether citizenship includes not only access to food, but access to food that is honestly represented, scientifically regulated, and reasonably safe to consume.

The Indian context gives this question particular urgency because food travels through long, layered, and uneven supply chains that connect production, processing, transport, storage, wholesale trade, retail sale, informal vending, restaurants, digital delivery platforms, laboratories, and regulators before finally reaching households. These chains cut across urban and rural space, formal and informal markets,

organised and small-scale enterprise, and highly unequal conditions of infrastructure and oversight. Such complexity means that risk is rarely located at one visible point. It can enter food through deliberate adulteration, poor hygiene, unsafe handling, compromised storage, weak packaging, negligent transportation, misleading labelling, or failures of monitoring and enforcement that allow dangerous practices to continue with little interruption. The ordinary buyer does not encounter this complexity directly. What the buyer encounters is the finished product and the expectation that someone, somewhere within the system, has already checked what cannot be personally verified. That expectation is central to the politics of food governance in India, because the farther the consumer stands from the sites of production and control, the more heavily public trust must rest on institutions. This is why unsafe food is not simply a matter of individual fraud or isolated misconduct. It is a symptom of how risks are organised, distributed, hidden, and governed in everyday life. The social meaning of food safety therefore goes well beyond the laboratory finding or the inspection report. It speaks to whether the regulatory order can actually protect people from preventable harm in the most routine and repetitive sphere of life. It also speaks to whether the state appears in the marketplace as a credible guardian of welfare or only as a formal presence that is stronger in statute than in consequence.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is concerned with how food safety governance works in practice, how enforcement gaps weaken the credibility of regulation, and how these weaknesses shape public health, public trust, and the lived experience of consumers. In the larger argument of the study, food safety is treated not as a narrow technical field but as a serious governance question that sits at the intersection of regulation, institutional capacity, market behaviour, and welfare. Because of that, the methodology has to do more than collect information, it has to create a structure through which legal frameworks, institutional patterns, public perception, and empirical trends can be examined together. A mixed method design is therefore appropriate because the research is not only asking what people think about adulteration,

contamination, labelling, and trust in FSSAI, but also asking how governance systems, administrative limits, and political conditions shape those experiences. The study needs both numbers and interpretation, because one helps reveal patterns while the other helps explain why those patterns continue despite a fairly developed regulatory framework. This methodological structure allows the research to connect public perception with institutional reality and to examine food safety as both a policy issue and a public health concern.

2.1 Sources of Data

The study relies on qualitative sources of data in order to build a balanced understanding of food safety governance in India.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical care is important in this study because the research deals with public perception, institutional trust, and respondent experience, all of which require respectful and responsible handling. Every participant will be informed in advance about the purpose of the survey and their consent will be obtained before any response is recorded. Participation will remain voluntary, and respondents will not be pressured, tracked, or exposed to any form of personal risk through the questionnaire. The responses will be kept anonymous, used only for academic purposes, and stored in a way that prevents misuse or unnecessary disclosure. The study will also maintain fairness in interpretation by presenting responses honestly and by avoiding manipulation of data to fit predetermined conclusions. In the qualitative component, institutional documents and official reports will be used carefully and cited properly, with attention to accuracy and context. This matters even more in a study on food governance, because the research itself is concerned with accountability, transparency, and public responsibility.

2.3 Limitations of the Study

Like any social research project, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged openly. The sample size is modest, so the survey findings are useful for indicating trends in consumer awareness and perception, but they cannot be treated as a complete representation of all consumers in

India. The use of convenience sampling also means that respondents are selected through practical access rather than strict probability procedures, which may affect the generalisability of the results. Since the questionnaire is perception based, some responses may reflect personal bias, limited information, recent experiences, or strong opinion rather than verified factual exposure. There may also be an urban or semi urban skew in the data because online forms are easier to access for respondents with internet connectivity and digital familiarity. Time is another limit, because a short collection period can capture current attitudes but may not fully reflect seasonal or regional changes in food related experience.

III. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In India, the food economy is not a small or easily controlled field. It is a dense and expansive social space in which agriculture, transport, storage, wholesale trade, small retail, large scale manufacturing, street vending, restaurants, processed food networks, and digital delivery systems are all tied together in complicated ways. Food moves through formal and informal channels at the same time. It is handled by actors with very different levels of compliance, resources, and knowledge. It is purchased by consumers who are deeply dependent on the integrity of the market, yet usually unable to verify for themselves the safety, composition, or truthfulness of what they buy. That is why food safety has to be understood as a practical question of governance and not only as a legal subject. A system may have clear legislation, detailed regulations, a dedicated authority, and a broad language of public protection, but if adulteration, contamination, and deception continue to shape daily market conditions, then the real problem lies in the inability of institutions to convert legal intention into social protection. Unsafe food is not merely the result of isolated misconduct. It is the symptom of a regulatory order whose normative promise remains stronger than its operational force. The distance between these two levels is where the central crisis of food safety now lies. It is the distance between the law on paper and the market in practice, between public assurance and private doubt, between administrative activity and genuine deterrence, and between the formal

language of safety and the material reality of risk carried into homes through ordinary consumption.

Food adulteration remains one of the sharpest expressions of this contradiction because it reveals the point at which commercial incentive directly collides with public welfare. It is often discussed in moral terms, and the moral dimension is undeniable, since adulteration involves the deliberate or strategic lowering of quality, the substitution of ingredients, the dilution of products, or the concealment of harmful or substandard content in ways that transfer hidden risk onto the consumer. Yet if adulteration is examined only as individual wrongdoing, the broader structure that sustains it is missed. Its persistence over time suggests that it survives not merely because some actors are dishonest, but because the regulatory and market environment continues to make certain forms of dishonesty economically attractive. When the expected gain from dilution or substitution remains substantial, and the expected risk of detection and punishment remains weak, delayed, or uncertain, non compliance can become a rational strategy in parts of the market. This is especially true in sectors where competition is intense, margins are thin, products are difficult for consumers to assess directly, and enforcement does not operate with equal seriousness across all categories of food. In such conditions, adulteration becomes more than a violation of a rule. It becomes a structural possibility built into the relationship between profit, risk, and uneven regulation. Its social significance is amplified because the products affected are frequently not luxury items consumed occasionally by a small elite, but staple goods, everyday commodities, and mass consumed items that enter ordinary households repeatedly. Milk, edible oils, spices, sweets, grains, beverages, and packaged food are not peripheral to the economy of life. They are part of daily sustenance. The adulteration of such products therefore creates a peculiar form of harm. It exposes a deeper weakness in governance, because where adulteration remains widespread despite extensive legal prohibition, the market has effectively learned that the law does not always carry enough practical force to transform economic behaviour. In a country like India, where the food economy spans highly modern manufacturing units, small informal producers, mobile vendors, wet markets, local storage facilities, and varied transport conditions,

contamination is not merely a technical possibility. It is a structurally recurrent risk. It also reveals how much the effectiveness of food law depends on infrastructures that are often less visible in public debate than the law itself. Laboratory systems, inspection frequency, chain surveillance, cold storage conditions, sanitation practices, staff training, local government coordination, and reliable testing capacity all shape whether contamination remains occasional or becomes routine. A statute can prohibit unsafe food, but if the material chain that supports safety remains weak, the prohibition struggles to become real in daily life. This is why contamination should be read as a governance issue and not merely a sanitary one. It reflects the depth or weakness of institutional presence across the actual movement of food in society.

Misleading labelling practices intensify this problem in a distinct but equally important way because they affect the very information through which a modern food economy claims to make itself intelligible to consumers. In contemporary markets, labels are not ornamental. They are central instruments through which products present themselves as lawful, safe, nutritious, authentic, or suitable for specific needs. A label communicates ingredients, nutritional content, composition, quantity, use conditions, origin, storage instructions, manufacturing details, and often broader claims regarding purity, healthfulness, quality, naturalness, or fortification. In theory, such disclosures reduce information asymmetry between producer and consumer. In practice, however, the value of the label depends entirely on the truthfulness, clarity, and enforceability of what it communicates. Where labels are misleading, incomplete, strategically vague, exaggerated, or difficult to understand, the appearance of transparency can coexist with the reality of deception. That is what makes misleading labelling so serious. It does not merely add another technical violation to the list of food offences. It attacks one of the principal mechanisms by which regulatory systems seek to govern through information. The modern consumer is expected to rely on labels in ways that earlier markets did not require to the same extent. But that expectation is fair only when labels are truthful and when institutions back their truthfulness with credible verification. If the label

becomes a site of manipulation, then the burden of safe decision making is placed on consumers without giving them the means to make truly informed decisions. The result is a distorted model of market citizenship in which people are told that information protects them, even while the informational environment itself is compromised. The seriousness of misleading labelling is magnified by the social diversity of the Indian market. Consumers do not approach labels from a position of equal literacy, equal nutritional knowledge, equal time, equal price flexibility, or equal access to alternatives. An educated and affluent consumer may be able to read and compare labels carefully, search for additional information, reject suspicious products, and absorb the higher cost of safer or premium alternatives. Many other consumers do not enjoy those conditions. They purchase quickly, under economic pressure, and often from limited local choices. For them, the label may function less as a source of informed comparison and more as a shorthand sign of trust. This makes deceptive labels particularly harmful, because they exploit vulnerability while preserving the formal appearance of compliance. Even where the information provided is technically present, it may be so cluttered, obscure, or poorly communicated that it does not genuinely empower the buyer. The problem, then, is not only whether producers disclose something. It is whether disclosure operates as meaningful communication rather than formal cover. A food governance system that relies on labelling must therefore do more than issue rules about packaging and declarations. It must ask whether labels are intelligible across social contexts, whether false or misleading claims are actually investigated, and whether the consumer can use information as a real shield rather than a symbolic one. This is why misleading labelling is not a peripheral concern. It lies at the heart of modern regulatory legitimacy. If food safety depends on informed choice, then informational integrity becomes inseparable from public protection.

The public health implications of food adulteration, contamination, and deceptive labelling extend far beyond individual episodes of harm. Unsafe food contributes to illness, nutritional instability, household anxiety, avoidable healthcare costs, and broader welfare loss. The conceptual framework of

this study has already emphasised that food safety must be understood as part of the wider public health burden carried by society, and not merely as a sector specific regulatory concern. This insight is crucial because it shifts attention from technical violation to bodily consequence. Foodborne illness, toxic exposure, nutritional dilution, and long term effects of repeated consumption of substandard products do not remain confined within the neat categories of law. They spill outward into homes, clinics, public hospitals, school systems, labour productivity, and the emotional economy of family life. The social cost of unsafe food is therefore much larger than the immediate legal file generated by a sample failure or prosecution. It includes the strain placed on already burdened healthcare systems, the silent erosion of nutritional quality in low income households, the unequal exposure of vulnerable populations, and the creation of a market environment in which suspicion becomes normal. The burden is especially severe because food is not consumed occasionally. It is repeated, cumulative, and inescapable. Harm caused by unsafe food can therefore accumulate in subtle ways. It may not always take the form of dramatic poisoning or a widely reported outbreak. It may instead appear through recurring digestive illness, compromised nutrition, chemical exposure, or chronic uncertainty about what enters the body. This makes food safety a deeply public matter. It concerns the ordinary conditions under which a population lives and reproduces its health.

IV. CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, the study set out to understand food safety in India not as a narrow technical issue but as a larger question of governance, public health, accountability, and everyday citizenship, and the overall finding is clear: the country has built an advanced legal and institutional structure, yet the promise of safe and wholesome food is still weakened by uneven implementation on the ground. The Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 marked an important shift from fragmented regulation to a more unified framework, and the creation of FSSAI gave food governance a central statutory authority, science based standards, and a more preventive regulatory language. Even so, the research shows that legal consolidation by itself does not guarantee lived

protection, because standards must still travel through inspection, testing, laboratories, prosecution, state level coordination, public communication, and institutional follow through before they become meaningful to the ordinary consumer. The core argument developed across the study is therefore that the real difficulty in India is not the absence of law, but the continuing gap between law on paper and law in action.

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