

Masala Mess

The controversy over the banned colourant in red chilli powder exported from India has also made domestic consumers wary



SUMEET INDER SINGH

Indian chilli powder has been giving the world a lot of hiccups lately. After the controversy over Sudan 1, the banned dye traced in Indian chilli powder, the quality of spices sold in the country too has come under scrutiny. The issue erupted after leading Italian food manufacturer Premier Foods was told that a batch of Worcester sauce exported by it contained the dye. The suspect powder was traced to a consignment from India. It had been used in 350-odd foods sold across Europe and the UK. It resulted in the biggest ever food recall in England and 14 other countries, with £15 million (Rs 126 crore) worth of food recalled in the UK itself.

What is missing in this red hot tale is that the European Union's (EU) guidelines on the red dye came a year after the consignment left India. "That shipment was dated 2002

and the importing countries accepted it on the basis of existing guidelines. So why the hue and cry now?" asks Rahul Khullar, joint secretary in the Union Ministry of Commerce and Industry, making a very strong and valid point.

After the EU's warnings against Sudan 1 in 2003, pre-shipment sampling was made compulsory by the Spices Board of India, the central regulatory body for Indian spices, informs S. Kannan, its marketing director. Erring

Maharashtra's ban on sale of unbranded spices might make other states follow suit.



exporters even had their licences revoked. The Sudan 1 dye is used for colouring solvents, oils, waxes, petrol and shoe and floor polishes and is banned because it contains carcinogens that have caused cancer in animals. Dr Alex Hildebrand, food safety expert at the WHO in Delhi, adds that there is no data on its effects on human beings and only long-term exposure can produce risks. But for all the fuss, only 6.4 per cent of the total spices exported from India went to the EU and 3 per cent to the UK, whereas 73 per cent was exported to the US, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Malaysia. Which is perhaps why the export of Indian spices, 46 per cent of the global spice trade, will remain unaffected.

The controversy has raised concerns about whether export quality parameters are being applied to the domestic market too. For instance, in 2004, MDH, one of the oldest spice brands, came under flak from the UK's Food Standards Agency because its Deggi Lal Mirch, a red chilli powder variety, had higher aflatoxin (a naturally occurring toxin) levels than mandated. "We were not aware that some countries had changed the acceptable levels of aflatoxin," explains Raman Khanna, export manager, MDH. But no warning about the suspect Deggi Lal Mirch packets was issued in India.

India's Prevention of Food Adulteration Act mandates that all spices (like other foodstuff) should be sold with packaging that carries manufacture and expiry dates and an Agmark or ISI mark to certify quality. Even so, loose masalas, or those in transparent wrapping without any labels are sold in retail shops everywhere. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of Maharashtra is the only one to

have responded proactively. Effective from May 1, it has banned the sale of unpackaged and unbranded spices.

The least the Central FDA needs to do is to weed out all contaminated spices from India's food chain. A new dye must be used to ensure the purity of red chilli powder, the most used spice in every household in India. *by Shefalee Vasudev*