



National Human Rights Commission

Minutes of the Core Group Meeting on Right to Food and Nutrition held on 6th April, 2026 at Manav Adhikar Bhavan, New Delhi

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India, organised a Core Group Meeting on Right to Food and Nutrition on the theme **'Tackling Food Adulteration in India: Understanding the Scale, Challenges and Reforms'** on 6th April 2026, at Manav Adhikar Bhavan, New Delhi, in hybrid mode. The meeting was chaired by Hon'ble Chairperson, NHRC Justice V. Ramasubramanian. Hon'ble Members Justice (Dr.) Bidyut Ranjan Sarangi and Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani; Secretary General, Shri Bharat Lal; Director General (Investigation), Smt. Anupama Nilekar Chandra; Registrar (Law), Shri Joginder Singh; Joint Secretaries, Shri Samir Kumar and Smt. Saidingpuii Chhakchhuak, along with other senior officers of NHRC and government functionaries from the centre and state governments, core group members, statutory bodies, human rights defenders, consumer activists, members of academia, civil society and domain experts attended the meeting. The list of participants is **annexed**. The meeting was focused on the three key agendas:

- i.) understanding food adulteration and its prevalence;
- ii.) challenges in food safety law enforcement; and
- iii.) reforms, consumer empowerment and community engagement.



2. Smt. Saidingpuii Chhakchhuak, Joint Secretary, NHRC, extended a warm welcome to all the participants and highlighted how food safety is often perceived as the mandate of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), even though the issue of food

adulteration extends beyond a single regulatory body. She further urged all participants to actively engage in the deliberations and contribute practical recommendations, recognising that food adulteration effectively constitutes a violation of human rights.

3. In his opening remarks, **Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General**, noted that the issue of food adulteration is intrinsically linked with constitutional and public health concerns, particularly Article 21 (Right to Life) and Article 47 (Directive Principles relating to nutrition and public health). He further highlighted that considerable efforts are being made and significant attention is being given to health; however, adulterated food continues to adversely affect vulnerable populations. He also pointed out that annually, approximately 20 – 25 percent of food samples fail quality standards and elaborated that such failures are primarily attributed to issues of traceability and challenges in effectively withdrawing adulterated products from the market once they have entered the supply chain. He also highlighted that the Commission has also received complaints on this issue and has taken *suo motu* cognisance. He encouraged participants to share their experiences and insights to help generate meaningful, actionable outcomes from the discussion. He requested all the participants to highlight actionable points as very experienced people are attending this meet.



4. **Hon'ble Chairperson, Justice V. Ramasubramanian**, while addressing the participants, provided a historical overview of the legislative framework relating to food adulteration in India. He observed that concerns regarding food adulteration have been recognised since ancient times, including references in texts attributed to Kautilya, wherein strict penalties were prescribed for adulteration of essential commodities. Hon'ble Chairperson provided a comprehensive overview of India's legal framework to combat food adulteration, tracing its evolution from the Madras Prevention of Adulteration Act 1918, which laid the foundation for regulating food quality and preventing adulteration, to the Food Safety and Standards Act 2006. Justice Ramasubramanian emphasised that government action alone cannot resolve this widespread issue. With the nation's focus on healthy living, along with longevity, ensuring safe and nutritious food for all, especially the vulnerable population, is

essential for securing India's future. While acknowledging the vast scale and complexity of the problem, Justice Ramasubramanian emphasised the need for sincere and sustained efforts to tackle it. He urged stakeholders to shift the focus from merely reiterating facts and challenges to engaging in solution-oriented discussions that can lead to meaningful and practical reforms.



5. **Hon'ble Member, Justice (Dr.) Bidyut Ranjan Sarangi, NHRC**, emphasised that addressing food adulteration demands sustained public awareness and behavioural change more than regulation. He highlighted how empowering consumers through continuous sensitisation, coupled with targeted capacity-building initiatives, can act as a strong first line of defence against adulteration. He drew attention to the interconnected nature of food systems, noting that contamination is rarely isolated. Industrial discharge into water bodies and excessive use of pesticides in agriculture have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only immediate consumers but also public health outcomes and the nation's economic productivity in the long run.



Advocating a shift in approach, he called for development that is both scientifically informed and environmentally sustainable. He stressed the need to promote safer agricultural practices, reduce dependence on harmful chemicals and move towards a more organised

and accountable food ecosystem. Importantly, he affirmed that meaningful change must begin at the grassroots. Educating farmers and local stakeholders, building their capacities and integrating them into the broader food safety framework are essential steps towards ensuring safe, healthy and sustainable food for all.

6. **Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member, NHRC**, offered a range of practical suggestions to address the issue of food adulteration. She recommended the establishment of a Special Food Adulteration Task Force in every district, comprising officials from Food Safety, Police, Municipal Authorities and the Revenue Department. She further proposed the introduction of mobile food safety laboratories for on-the-spot testing in schools, markets and other public places, along with periodic testing of commonly consumed items such as milk, sweets and chocolates, particularly those consumed by children. Emphasising the need for strict enforcement, she suggested imposing stringent penalties, including fines, cancellation of licenses and imprisonment for repeat offenders. She also recommended the creation of a 24/7 helpline and a digital reporting system to facilitate public complaints regarding suspected adulteration and highlighted transparency as a deterrent through public disclosure of names of shops and companies found guilty. Additionally, she proposed that States submit a Food Safety Report to NHRC every six months and stressed the need to provide adequate compensation to affected families along with fast-track proceedings for cases related to food adulteration.

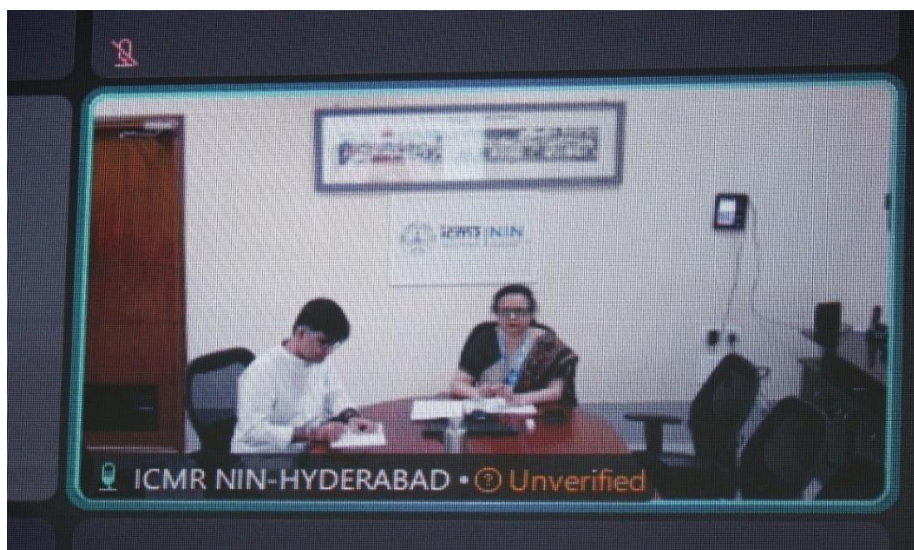


7. **Shri Rajit Punani, CEO, FSSAI**, while sharing his view in the meeting virtually, clarified that there are several misconceptions surrounding FSSAI, noting that the Authority primarily lays down standards. He shared that nearly 4 lakh inspections were conducted by state food safety departments last year, out of which about 1,65,000 food samples were analysed. Approximately 17% of these samples were found non-conforming, falling into three categories of substandard, misbranded and unsafe. He explained that, as per provisions under the Jan Vishwas framework, offences related to unsafe food are criminal in nature;

while misbranding and substandard categories attract penalties. Shri Punani emphasised the importance of encouraging more vendors to register themselves. He further highlighted that strengthening food safety departments in the states is critical, with better performance observed in states with independent Food Safety Commissioners, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. He also pointed out the issue of vacancies in food safety departments, which is being addressed at the level of the Inter-State and Zonal Councils. He further noted that continuous inspections, raids and seizure of adulterated materials are necessary as part of the ongoing enforcement initiative to deter violations. He informed that regulatory changes are under consideration to ensure that products are not mislabelled and appropriate disclosures are made to consumers.

8. **Dr. Monika Singh, Director, Ministry of Women and Child Development**, informed that the Ministry is implementing flagship programmes Mission Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0, under which supplementary nutrition is provided to beneficiaries. She highlighted that the primary role of the states is to ensure due diligence in the preparation and distribution of food, including maintaining freshness, adherence to prescribed recipes and overall quality standards. It was also mentioned that in cases where the quality of food is compromised, beneficiaries may lodge complaints.

9. **Ms. Anusree Raha, Deputy Secretary, DoSEL**, outlined the ongoing implementation of PM POSHAN Scheme. She noted that the programme has been in operation for a considerable period and there is a robust framework of checks and balances to ensure food safety and quality. To enhance accountability and transparency, she informed that social audits are being conducted across States, with a mandate that at least 2% of schools undertake such audits. She highlighted that 45% of schools have established School Nutrition Gardens. She emphasised the need for developing a practical handbook to facilitate testing of food adulteration in school science laboratories, which would empower schools to independently verify food quality. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of simplifying and demystifying terminologies related to food adulteration, particularly for SHGs. Lastly, she suggested exploring the development of AI-based tools and technological solutions that could assist in detecting food adulteration in meals consumed by children, thereby strengthening the overall monitoring and safety framework.



10. **Dr. Bharati Kulkarni, Director, ICMR**, emphasised the need for a robust multi-sectoral surveillance mechanism wherein food ingredients are systematically monitored and investigated at every stage, right from the farm level, where contamination and pesticide exposure often originate, to the later stages of the supply chain. It was suggested that there should be a formal adoption of the WHO/ FAO Risk Assessment Framework, including steps for its implementation by state governments, encompassing hazard identification, hazard characterisation, exposure assessment and risk characterisation to determine safe intake levels of food contaminants.



11. **Dr. Richa Kumar, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi**, provided a scientific and systemic perspective on contamination across the food chain. She highlighted growing concerns regarding toxic exposure pathways, including pesticide residues in crops and microplastics entering the food chain through packaging materials such as milk packets. She observed that the current testing capacity and coverage of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) are insufficient, given the scale of India's food systems. She also raised concerns about the lack of transparency, noting that food testing results are not consistently available in the public domain, thereby limiting consumer awareness and accountability. She referred

to biomonitoring initiatives by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare that track chemical exposure in populations. She also observed that while India produces over 146 million tonnes of rice, surplus production is diverted for ethanol and argued that the focus should shift from quantity to quality and safety. She also recommended a system-wide reform approach involving mapping the entire lifecycle of food products, identifying contamination points at each stage and integrating scientific monitoring, including biomonitoring, into regulatory frameworks.

12. **Prof. Bejon Kumar Mishra, International Consumer Policy Expert**, expressed appreciation to the Commission for bringing attention to the critical issue of food adulteration and noted that it directly impacts consumer welfare. He observed that consumers increasingly look for products that meet internationally accepted standards and therefore, the process of setting such standards must involve consultation with all relevant stakeholders. He further stressed the importance of strengthening transparency and accountability in governance, particularly in the functioning of food testing mechanisms. To ensure credibility and trust in the system, he recommended the establishment of robust vigilance mechanisms within food safety frameworks. He suggested that there should be a dedicated 24x7 consumer helpline to address complaints related to food quality and adulteration. He pointed out the inadequacy of consumer awareness initiatives despite the central role consumers play in driving the economy. In this context, he laid importance on disseminating information and awareness in vernacular languages. In his concluding remarks, he advocated for a system where institutional mechanisms proactively support consumers in seeking redress and safeguarding their rights.

13. **Ms. Pushpa Girimaji, Consumer Rights Activist and Senior Journalist**, highlighted the multiple forms in which food adulteration manifests and underscores the growing concern of heavy metal contamination and pesticide residues in food, which pose serious risks to public health. She emphasised the urgent need for a comprehensive national-level study to assess the scale and nature of the problem. She further stressed the importance of ensuring greater transparency in food testing processes and called for the establishment of a consumer helpline. In her concluding remarks, she recommended the creation of a central coordinating mechanism to align the efforts of various stakeholders with the primary objective of preventing food adulteration.



14. **Shri N. Venkateswaran, CEO, NABL**, emphasised the need to strengthen food quality assurance systems through greater institutional collaboration. He suggested that the FSSAI should leverage nationally accredited laboratories to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of food testing mechanisms. He further proposed that quality awareness campaigns should be conducted. He also recommended onboarding conformity assessment bodies to strengthen monitoring and ensure better compliance with prescribed food safety standards.

15. **Dr. Giridhar Parvatam, Director, Central Food Technical Research Institute**, observed that the FSSAI should not limit its role to consumer awareness initiatives alone, but also focus on strengthening the technical capacities of stakeholders within the food safety ecosystem. In particular, he emphasised the need to provide updated technical and analytical training to Food Analysts working in referral food laboratories, as well as professionals associated with other accreditation and testing bodies. While underscoring the importance of enhancing consumer awareness, he also highlighted the need to allow laboratories to give feedback and inputs to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India.

16. **Dr. Monalisha Sahu, Associate Professor, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health**, commenced her remarks by emphasising the traditional principle that food should serve as medicine, a concept reflected in the Vedic texts. She highlighted three key suggestions. One, the need to strengthen consumer awareness. Two, the need to implement stricter norms to regulate the excessive reuse of cooking oil, along with effective monitoring of Total Polar Compound (TPC) limits to safeguard public health. Three, the need to establish a robust testing and surveillance framework for food products.



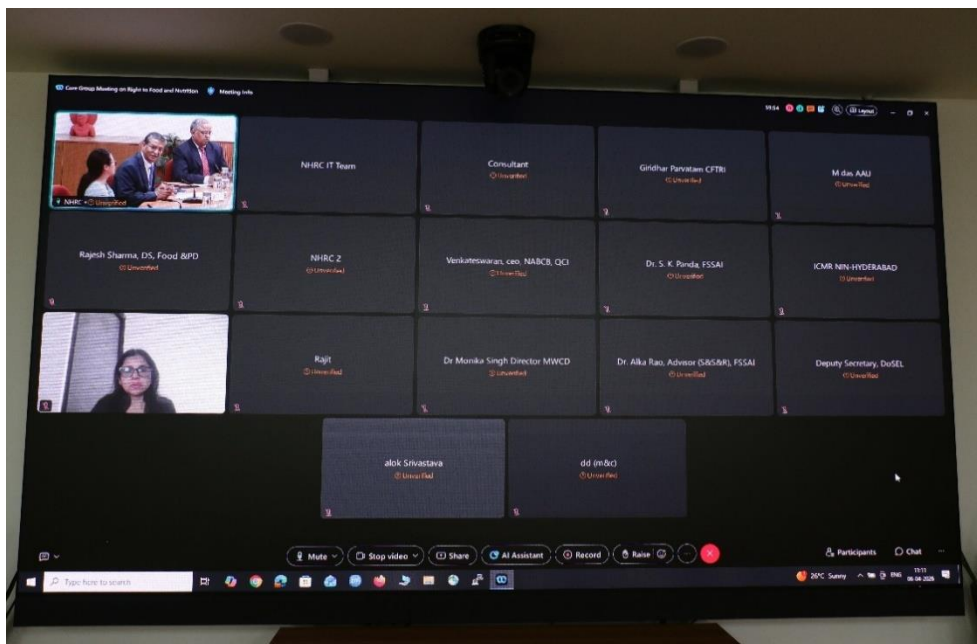
17. **Ms. Vandana Singh, CEO, Food Security Foundation India, India Food Banking Network**, focused on the behavioural and perception-related aspects of food safety among consumers. She highlighted that widespread misconceptions exist, where consumers often judge food quality based on appearance rather than actual safety, leading to unnecessary rejection of edible food. She emphasised the need for large-scale public awareness campaigns to correct such misconceptions, reduce food wastage driven by cosmetic preferences and educate consumers about scientifically valid indicators of food safety.

18. **Dr. Mamoni Das, Dean, Department of Food Science & Nutrition, Assam Agriculture University**, highlighted that there should be stricter implementation of Food Safety and Standards Act. She highlighted the importance of tightening licensing procedures for food vendors. She strongly advocated for the integration of advanced technologies such as Artificial Intelligence to enable real-time monitoring and blockchain for supply chain transparency. She also suggested that there should be stricter quality check for mid-day meal scheme.

19. **Dr. Alok Kumar Srivastava, Former Chief Scientist & Head, Association of Food Scientists & Technologists**, recommended that there should be deployment of affordable, hand-held rapid detection devices that can facilitate on-the-spot testing of food items (like dairy) and be used widely by consumers, inspectors and vendors. He also advocated for the use of AI-based early warning systems capable of analysing contamination patterns, predicting risks and enabling preventive action. Additionally, he raised concerns regarding significant judicial and procedural delays, highlighting that cases under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act 1954 continued to be brought before the court even today, often based on the reports that are more than 15 years old, by which time evidence becomes obsolete and weakens prosecution.

20. **Dr. Shweta Khandelwal, Vice President, IPE Global Delhi**, presented a structured “VIGILANT” framework for strengthening food safety systems in a comprehensive and integrated manner. She explained that the framework includes V - Visual and Versatile

Testing and Informed Labelling to ensure consumers have access to clear and accurate information. She highlighted the importance of aligning with global standards such as those set by WHO and Codex to ensure quality and enhance export competitiveness. She further emphasised Integrated Digital Tracking through platforms like FoSCoS using AI for real-time monitoring and traceability. Legislative rigour was identified as essential to address minor compliance issues and to prevent systemic gaps. Finally, she underscored the importance of training and capacity building across all stakeholders, promoting behavioural change, integrating food safety education at the school level and encouraging the use of technology for grievance redressal and reporting violations.



21. **Dr. Satyen Kumar Panda, Advisor, FSSAI**, emphasised the need for greater consumer involvement in tackling food adulteration. He highlighted that FSSAI supports the states through a network of laboratories to ensure food quality standards. He also informed about the availability of Rapid Food Testing Kits and the guidelines issued for their proper use.

22. In his concluding remarks, **Justice V. Ramasubramanian, Hon'ble Chairperson, NHRC**, reiterating the observations of earlier speakers, reflected on the gradual erosion of the traditional Indian ethos that regarded food as medicine, an essence also echoed in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. He observed that India has historically been proactive in consumer protection, noting that consumer protection legislation in India predates similar frameworks in England. However, he emphasised that the core challenge today lies not in the absence of robust laws, but in their effective implementation. Highlighting a critical behavioural dimension, he pointed out that consumer indifference has emerged as a more serious concern than lack of awareness. This indifference, he cautioned, perpetuates a vicious cycle in which individuals consume adulterated food, fall ill and subsequently rely on compromised or substandard medical remedies, thereby compounding risks to public health and ultimately emerging as a defining challenge confronting society today. He encouraged all

the participants to structure the views expressed in the deliberations and share them with the Commission for it to draw up concrete, actionable recommendations.

23. The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks to the chair.

List of Participants

National Human Rights Commission, India

- i.) Justice V. Ramasubramanian, Hon'ble Chairperson
- ii.) Justice (Dr.) Bidyut Ranjan Sarangi, Hon'ble Member
- iii.) Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member
- iv.) Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General
- v.) Smt. Anupama Nilekar Chandra, Director General (Investigation)
- vi.) Shri Joginder Singh, Registrar (Law)
- vii.) Shri Samir Kumar, Joint Secretary
- viii.) Smt. Saindingpuii Chhakchhuak, Joint Secretary
- ix.) Dr. Rajul Raikwar, Consultant (Research)
- x.) Ms. Vintee Sangwan, Research Assistant

Core Group Members

- i.) Dr. Alok Kumar Srivastava, Former Chief Scientist & Head, Association of Food Scientists & Technologists
- ii.) Dr. Mamoni Das, Dean, Department of Food Science & Nutrition, Assam Agriculture University
- iii.) Dr. Shweta Khandelwal, Vice President, IPE Global Delhi
- iv.) Ms. Vandana Singh, CEO, Food Security Foundation India, India Food Banking Network
- v.) Dr. Richa Kumar, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi
- vi.) Shri N. Venkateswaran, CEO, NABL
- vii.) Dr. Monalisha Sahu, Associate Professor, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health
- viii.) Dr. Giridhar Parvatam, Director, CSIR

Ex-Officio Members

- i.) Shri Rajit Punhani, CEO, FSSAI
- ii.) Shri Satyen Kumar Panda, Advisor (Quality Assurance), FSSAI
- iii.) Dr. Alka Rao, Advisor (Quality Assurance), FSSAI
- iv.) Ms. Monika Singh, Director, Ministry of Women and Child Development
- v.) Dr. Bharati Kulkarni, Director ICMR–NIN
- vi.) Shri Rajesh Sharma, Deputy Secretary, Department of Food and Public Distribution
- vii.) Ms. Anusree Raha, Deputy Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy

Special Invitees

- i.) Prof. Bejon Mishra, International Consumer Policy Expert
- ii.) Ms. Pushpa Girimaji, Consumer Rights Activist and Senior Journalist