Experts warn against mandatory food fortification

In letter to FSSAI, they say it will have adverse impact on health, livelihoods

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

In a push back against the Centre's plan to mandatorily fortify rice and edible oils with vitamins and minerals, a group of scientists and activists has written to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), warning of the adverse impacts on health and livelihoods. They cited multiple studies to show that dietary diversity and higher protein consumption are key to solving undernutrition in India, rather than adding a few synthetic micronutrients which could harm the health of consumers.

The letter, sent on Monday to the FSSAI as well as to the Food, Agriculture and Health Ministries and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, was signed by 170 individuals and organisations, including eminent nutritionists, economists, doctors and farmers groups.

'Inconclusive evidence'

One of the signatories is Veena Shatrugna, former deputy director of the National Institute of Nutrition, who warned that "evidence supporting fortification is inconclusive and certainly not adequate before major national policies are rolled out".

The letter pointed to recent studies published in the medical journal *Lancet* and in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* which show that both anaemia and Vitamin A deficiencies are overdiagnosed, meaning that mandatory fortification could lead to hypervitaminosis. It also noted that many of the studies which FSSAI relies upon to promote fortification were sponsored by food companies which would benefit from it, leading to conflicts of interest. Studies funded by the Nestle Nutrition Institute and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition were mentioned as cases in point.

Farm workers planting paddy seedlings. ▪ PTI

The letter explained that a major problem with chemical fortification of foods is that nutrients don't work in isolation but need each other for optimal absorption. Undernourishment in India is caused by monotonous cereal-based diets with low consumption of vegetables and animal protein. "Adding one or two synthetic chemical vitamins and minerals will not solve the larger problem, and in undernourished populations can lead to toxicity," it said, citing a 2010 study that showed iron fortification causing gut inflammation and pathogenic gut microbiota profile in undernourished children.

The letter also argued that mandatory fortification would harm the vast informal economy of Indian farmers and food processors, including local oil and rice mills, and instead benefit a small group of multinational corporations.

Dietary diversity was a healthier and more cost-effective way to fight malnutrition, it said. "Once iron-fortified rice is sold as the remedy to anaemia, the value and the choice of naturally iron-rich foods like millets, varieties of green leafy vegetables and flesh foods will have been suppressed by a policy silence," it warned.