

FSSAI must detect problem in food, not Amitabh

Compared to the Parliamentary Standing Committee that wanted celebrities endorsing bad products—like Maggi noodles—to be imprisoned for up to two years, the Group of Ministers has done a good job in watering this down to a fine of up to R50 lakh and a possible three-year ban on appearing in advertisements. After all, their logic would have been, [Amitabh Bachchan](#)—and Madhuri Dixit and Preity Zinta—earned good money from the endorsement, so now that the product has been found to be faulty, he should at least part with some part of his endorsement fee; and preventing him from appearing in any ad for the next three years will ensure he does not endorse sub-standard products in future. But, the obvious question is, did Bachchan know Maggi was a sub-standard product when he was endorsing it? At that point, since the FSSAI had not said the product had a problem, whom was the actor supposed to check with, or was he supposed to take Maggi's product and get it checked from an independent laboratory first? And, in this particular case, since it is now clear the FSSAI was guilty of running a motivated campaign to discredit Maggi—it is FSSAI's good fortune, Nestle is not suing it for damages—does this mean a Bachchan should have been arrested when Maggi was withdrawn from the market and then released once Maggi was cleared?

Celebrity-bashing may be a fun sport, but the Group of Ministers should have realised the only people responsible for ensuring that products/services are up to the mark are government authorities or regulatory bodies appointed to ensure quality in various sectors. If an Amrapali Group does not deliver flats on time, MS Dhoni cannot be held responsible, this is the job of some government authority or a court since, till now, no real estate regulator has been appointed—indeed, the fact that most builders are guilty of such behaviour makes it clear a regulatory solution is called for, not putting a Dhoni behind bars. Or take the problems at the Bank of Rajasthan. If anyone is to be blamed for not spotting the problem on time, or at least not alerting the public on time, it is the central bank, not the person the bank had hired to endorse it in advertisements on television.

Apart from the fact that celebrities cannot be held responsible for deficiency in service/product quality, the biggest problem with celebrity-bashing is that it shifts the focus away from the functioning of the government/regulatory authority. And, apart from this, if the government needs to take action against misleading advertising, it needs to work on advertising standards or codes. While advertising for liquor or tobacco is not allowed, surrogate advertisements have been aired/printed for decades without any action—this is what allowed a Pierce Brosnan to model for a Pan Bahar and later claim he was modeling for a breath

freshener/tooth whitener. And if celebrity endorsers are to be fined for misleading the public, has the friendly doctor in toothpaste ads really tested all products to know that Brand X helps fix sensitive teeth? And does that detergent bar really wash off stains with a simple dip in a tub and a light scrub? Both the Parliamentary Standing Committee and the Group of Ministers are guilty of playing nanny since consumers recognise ads for what they are.