

## A cynical nation on overdrive

Written by Administrator

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**By Sidharth Mishra**



The controversy over the instant noodle brand Maggi suddenly has everybody rushing to make a story out of a non-story. With the way the script has unfolded, we could well commission a full-length feature film with the title, ♦Noodles take the nation to cleaners. ♦ Have we become unnecessarily hysterical over something as innocuous as a brand of noodles?

Well, truth be told our hysterical media, especially television, is capable of going bonkers on any non-issue and miss the forest for the trees. Let me start today's notebook with the disclaimer that I am not a devoted eater of Maggi noodles. The Nestle product which I go looking for on the shelves of the best endowed Kendriya Bhandar in Pandara Park area is the can of

condensed milk ♦ Milkmaid. Long years ago, during summer vacations at home, when ice-creams were not readily available in small towns, mothers in many homes whipped mango pulp with condensed milk to make great, delicious desserts.

I have continued making that homemade variety of ice-creams much to the consternation of my children, who would be happier if I brought home bricks being sold at a steep discount on push carts. Several ice-cream brands with exotic names and flavours have spawned over the past decade or so. They, the generation next, slurp ferociously at the blackcurrant ice-cream. However, I have my doubts if they would touch a ♦Jamun♦ flavoured ice-cream made at home.

The nation is being taken to the cleaners, at least the urban Indian because we rush for discounts. Promise a ♦free-sewa♦ and we are ready to pawn even our vote. We rush for the discount and then regret later. The Maggi story is that of playing on the Indian greed and search for a discount. According to figures released by the company, the multi-national giant spent Rs 445 crore on advertising and sales promotion last year. However, its expenditure on quality testing was just about 20 crore.

However, there is also an important and interesting facet to their expenditure profile. The expenses towards employees rose the most in the last five years, nearly up by about 75 percent from Rs. 433 crore in the year 2010 to Rs. 755 crore in 2014. Such was the prolific consumption of the instant noodle that it ran manufacturing units at Moga (Punjab), Choladi (Tamil Nadu), Nanjangud (Karnataka), Samalkha (Haryana), Ponda and Bicholim (Goa), Pantnagar (Uttarakhand) and Tahliwal (Himachal Pradesh). Needless to say that the cynicism over the issue and knee-jerk reactions from the state governments ordering shutting down of the units has, as one of the newspaper headlines put it, tied the future of the workers into noodle knots.

How did the noodle maker manage to create such a huge market for its product. A BJP motormouth had an instant answer. Usha Thakur, who is a member of Madhya Pradesh assembly from Indore, gave an inexplicable explanation, ♦I don't know why the mothers have become so lazy (that they serve children with instant noodles)? Mothers of our generation used to serve homemade food like ♦paratha♦, ♦halwa♦ and ♦sivaia♦ to their children.♦

Now Ms Thakur, parantha, halwa and sivaia could be equally unhealthy, dangerous and harmful for growing children, especially in urban areas where people lead a sedentary lifestyle. Moreover, the blazing success of the Maggi noodle cannot be entirely blamed on the demographic of ♦lazy mothers♦ as the BJP leader would have us believe. It had a great clientele among students living in private boarding houses close to coaching centres

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and bachelor professionals, who in their quest for success had little time for food. Under these circumstances, the two-minute noodle came as both the time and money saver.

Whatsoever the newspaper reports, and also the laboratory reports, would have to say, if these instant noodles were so bad, we should have had a generation of crippled men and women. As a close acquaintance of mine very succinctly put it, "if Maggi noodles had lead, I should have by now turned into a pencil factory." I would say, well-said friend.

In our country, the centre and the state government dithered over imposing a ban on the consumption of tobacco. Where there is a never-ending debate on how big should the statutory warning on the cigarette packets be that smoking is injurious to health, we rush to shut down noodle making unit even before there is any case of anybody falling sick because s/he ate these instant noodles is reported.

Not the one to miss the opportunity to gain brownie points with the general public, Union Food Minister Ramvilas Paswan has planned for a prolonged battle with the noodle manufacturer in a consumer court. He recently described the alleged lapses related to food safety standards as a "serious issue" and said National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) will investigate the matter and take appropriate action if necessary. There are reports that the Department of Consumer Affairs has now filed a petition in the NCDRC. It is based on the order of FSSAI saying that Nestle indulged in unfair trade practices and misleading advertisements.

The effectiveness of Minister's order, as I said before, is only good for creating sound bytes. Whether it helped food safety in any way will not be known in near future. There is a definite case for hauling up the food ministry over burning coals for not having monitored the safety standards of packaged noodles all these years. It's the doing of few diligent technicians belonging to a small lab in Gorakhpur, and not the might of government machinery, that has brought the multi-national down to its knees.

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