

In India, a food safety inspector has become a celebrity

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rogue kitchens and sloppy manufacturers has captured India's imagination.

No business appears to escape Mr. Mundhe's attention. His staff has inspected famed establishments such as Olympia — where Matt Damon and Tom Holland had tea this summer while promoting "The Odyssey" — as well as street vendors, government cafeterias, high-end restaurants and chains like McDonald's.

Later that day, at the other end of the sprawling coastal city, an inspection team arrived unannounced at a factory for food flavorings and bakery additives. They found mango purée that was a year past its expiration date and mislabeled bottles of strawberry glazing gel. That business, too, was told to suspend operations.

His office has shared videos of raids with the news media, turning Mr. Mundhe, an abstemious, 51-year-old career bureaucrat, into an unlikely celebrity.

Bollywood actors praise him. Chastened restaurateurs file into his office to plead and cajole. Critics call him overzealous, while fans describe him as a modern saint and diners flash his image on their phones as a warning to servers.

What is not in dispute is that Mr. Mundhe, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration in Maharashtra, India's second most populous state, has set off a national conversation about food standards and hygiene.

"This is what I want — that people are aware about food safety," Mr. Mundhe said during an interview after the

Olympia raid, adding: "It's my job to keep the public's health safe."

AN AGGRESSIVE APPROACH

Indian news outlets regularly carry stories that make the stomach churn: students hospitalized after a lizard was found in their school breakfast, a family sickened by a resort's moldy birthday cake, a cockroach on a restaurant table at a five-star hotel.

"The overall situation around food safety and sanitation in India has been pretty bad," said Pawan Agarwal, a former head of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, the country's equivalent of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Regulations and testing facilities are comparable to those of many industrialized nations, all of which have unclean food establishments to some degree. But Mr. Agarwal said that in India, enforcement has been weak and often undermined by corruption. Consequences for violations can be minor, he said, and it can take years for cases to be litigated, allowing rule breakers to continue operating for long periods.

Mr. Mundhe, who took office in May, has been more aggressive, moving quickly to shut down noncompliant businesses until they address problems.

During a reporter's visit last month, in his office in a Mumbai business district, Mr. Mundhe stared stone-faced behind rimless glasses as proprietors trooped in to plead for a reprieve.

The owner of a Chinese restaurant that had been ordered to close showed cellphone photos of his sparkling



PHOTOGRAPH BY ZISHAAN ALTAIF FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

kitchen and new refrigeration system. Sheepish, he spoke of his employees, who he said were out of work.

"I am scared of you, sir," he said finally.

"You should be scared of the law and not me," Mr. Mundhe replied.

RURAL ORIGINS AND A MORAL CODE

Mr. Mundhe grew up in rural Maharashtra, on a farm so saddled with debt that he said he didn't own footwear until he was a teenager.

He credits his ethics to his father, a millet and vegetable farmer who once shared proceeds from a tree felled on his property with his brother, simply be-

cause it had shaded his brother's land, Mr. Mundhe said.

Mr. Mundhe's older brother Ashok, the first from the village to attend college, helped finance his education. After passing India's competitive civil service exam, Mr. Mundhe worked a range of jobs, including inspecting adulterated fuel and taking on local crime syndicates.

He has been transferred out of 25 posts in 21 years — which he attributed to his rigid adherence to the rules, work that at times had earned him death threats.

"What keeps me going is my simple philosophy, the ethical part of it, that if I



Above, Swamy Gowda, who runs a snack stall in Mumbai, has started wrapping food in food-grade wax paper instead of newspaper. Left, a food additives factory that was told to suspend operations after an inspection last month.

cannot do the job, who can?" he said.

Mr. Mundhe said he eats only one meal a day and avoids processed food. As commissioner, he has banned foods that are high in sugar, sodium, salt and fat from schools. He has also gone after corporations, turning up expired goods in one Amazon warehouse, and accusing PepsiCo and Red Bull of misleading consumers by labeling products "energy drinks," arguing that there is no approved definition of the term.

In his first three months, often acting on tips, Mr. Mundhe's office said it had inspected roughly 12,000 locations and found that only half were fully compliant.

Other powerful interests have chafed at his approach. Some on the Hindu right have accused him of unfairly targeting vendors at religious festivals. In July, the Bombay High Court questioned whether Mr. Mundhe was disproportionately going after private businesses.

Soon afterward, his office raided the court's canteens, shutting down two for lacking valid licenses. The next month, the court rebuked his office for going "overboard" and ordered it to pay roughly \$5,100 to a sweets shop for keeping its license suspended longer than judges said was necessary. Mr. Mundhe said he had appealed the decision.

To his fans, some of whom drop by his office for meet-and-greets, it's as if he can do no wrong.

One recent evening, a group of young college professors came to tell him they were making a documentary about his work. An aspiring civil servant said she had traveled over 500 miles (800 kilometers).

A group of dairy farmers from outside Mumbai thanked him for cracking down on tainted milk, saying their profits had risen.

Down the road from his office, Swamy Gowda, a food vendor, invoked Mr. Mundhe in explaining why he had begun wrapping his vada pav — Mumbai's favorite street snack, a potato cutlet nestled in a buttery roll — in food-grade wax paper. He had always used newspaper, which is far cheaper, but recently learned that it could leach toxic ink onto food.

"We need to follow what Mr. Mundhe says," he added. "Public health first."