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Maggi: a tangled mess[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sunali Swaminathan wrote this case under the supervision of Professor Gerard Seijts solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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June 4, 2015: A warm summer day greeted Nestlé SA (Nestlé)’s chief executive officer (CEO), Paul Bulcke, in India. He had flown into a media maelstrom surrounding one of Nestlé’s top-selling products in the Indian market: Maggi 2-Minute Noodles.[[2]](#endnote-2)

It had been almost a month since the test results showing that Maggi noodles contained traces of lead had leaked to the press across the state of Uttar Pradesh. The results came as a complete surprise to Nestlé India, Maggi’s parent company, which had requested a retest to contest allegations of monosodium glutamate (MSG) being found in its noodles by a food inspector on March 24, 2014, only to be blindsided by allegations of dangerous levels of lead.[[3]](#endnote-3) The story had since blown open with incessant media coverage, perfectly encapsulated by the theatrical protests taking place across the country where protesters and small children set ablaze packets of the famous noodles.[[4]](#endnote-4) And while the tests from the Kolkata-based lab and recent results from Delhi showed elevated levels of lead, none of the other thousands of samples tested by Nestlé and independent labs had produced lead greater than safe levels.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The top Indian food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), was led by Yudhvir Singh Malik, an experienced civil servant who had taken on the role six months before the Maggi crisis. Still new in his role, Malik had already inherited several disputes with multinational corporations, including Lindt & Sprüngli AG, Godiva Chocolatier, and Mars Inc., over labelling and quality issues. Malik viewed both the North American and European regulatory systems, and their consumer awareness, as advanced; he was eager to replicate similar standards in India.[[6]](#endnote-6) Furthermore, the relentless media coverage applied additional pressure on Malik and his team to act, especially as Maggi noodles were a staple in young children’s diets.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Bulcke had met with his leadership team in the morning, as they were responding to a late meeting request from the food regulators. Despite his team’s suggestion that he was “too senior” for the meeting, Bulcke was eager to get into the thick of things.[[8]](#endnote-8) What followed was a barrage of allegations and counter allegations by Nestlé India and the FSSAI regarding the credibility of the labs and the testing process. In the absence of reported cases of sickness as a result of food poisoning, the Maggi noodles panic was driven by the test results that originated from the lab in Kolkata and further exacerbated by the discovery of lead by a Delhi-based lab.[[9]](#endnote-9) Nestlé was confident in its ability to counteract the results with its own food safety tests.

As the meeting ended, Bulcke knew that the two parties couldn’t be farther apart. He sensed the regulators were ready to make a move, perhaps even institute the nationwide ban called for by vocal media critics.[[10]](#endnote-10) With all varieties of Maggi noodles now pulled off the shelves in Uttar Pradesh, questions of Maggi’s safety had spread across India and beyond. Nestlé India had already experienced an 8 per cent drop in its stock price,[[11]](#endnote-11) and concern was growing that the FSSAI would aggressively seek a nationwide ban following the popular #MaggiBan that had started trending online weeks ago. With Bulcke present, was it time for Nestlé to finally face the media and the public? What message should Nestlé deliver and how should it be delivered? Or was it too late to respond?

Nestlé in India

The Swiss-based transnational food and drink company Nestlé had a long history in India, dating back to 1912. Since it began manufacturing locally in 1961, Nestlé had built a large presence in India, one of the most populous nations in the world, employing more than 7,000 people in eight production facilities and four branch offices. Nestlé products were available in 3.5 million retail stores across India.

Nestlé India followed Nestlé’s international standards on food safety, and it was self-branded as the “world’s leading nutrition, health and wellness company.” In fact, Nestlé India employed 300 staff to handle food safety and quality assurance. In 2014, Nestlé India boasted revenue of ₹98 billion[[12]](#endnote-12) (CA$1.93 billion) (see Exhibit 1).[[13]](#endnote-13)

Despite Nestlé’s corporate reputation and strong brand, the Maggi crisis was only the latest controversy to trouble Nestlé. Previous controversies included the infamous 1974 “baby killer” issue—when it was revealed that babies in developing countries were dying after Nestlé convinced mothers to feed their babies with its Western-style baby formula[[14]](#endnote-14)—and the boycotts of Nestlé products after the company was found to be appropriating fresh water to supply its commercial water-bottling industry.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Nestlé had traditionally had a small communications department compared with similar multinational corporations. For example, Nestlé’s U.S. operation (for its largest market) lacked a centralized public relations team until 2013.[[16]](#endnote-16) Nestlé’s lack of direct communication during the Maggi crisis stayed true to its traditional approach, and the company was reluctant to proactively and directly engage the public or the media in a meaningful way.[[17]](#endnote-17) After the test result leaked on May 6, 2015, it was two weeks before Nestlé India issued a press release regarding the safety of its product on May 21, 2015, thereby allowing its critics to set the narrative.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The Maggi Brand

Given India’s affinity to a complex and often labour-intensive traditional cuisine, the introduction and ultimate dominance of the simple, two-minute noodles had been a success story for Nestlé. The affordable ₹12 packet (CA$0.23) was available in various flavours reflecting Indian spices and curries.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Maggi was one of Nestlé’s largest and oldest brands. The roots of the product went back to 1863, when Swiss industrialist Julius Maggi developed condensed pea and bean soups. The brand expanded into soups, noodles, and seasonings that were sold in more than 100 countries.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Nestlé launched Maggi noodles in 1983, a banner year that included India’s national team winning the cricket world cup for the first time. With its promise of a meal ready in two minutes, the iconic yellow packets became a go-to solution for millions of women, who were typically tasked with cooking for the family. Soon Maggi became a trusted and valued brand across Indian households. Maggi’s advertising for the most part targeted mothers, showing the product as a quick, easy, and tasty snack for young and school-aged children.[[21]](#endnote-21) Maggi also garnered the support of some of India’s top Bollywood celebrities, who added to the product’s fame.[[22]](#endnote-22) In a celebrity-obsessed culture that permeated every form of media, this seal of approval went a long way.[[23]](#endnote-23)

With its multitude of flavours borrowing from local cuisine, Maggi Noodles held a dominant 63 per cent share of the local market[[24]](#endnote-24) and accounted for almost a quarter of Nestlé India’s 2014 revenue of ₹8 billion (CA$1.93 billion).[[25]](#endnote-25) The important role of noodles in Nestlé India’s portfolio was further demonstrated by the fact that all research and development on Nestlé noodle products was based in India.[[26]](#endnote-26) Nestlé India also exported Maggi noodles to Canada, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Kenya, and to third-party distributors in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Noodles that were exported were the same as those sold in India, with changes to packaging and ingredients only to meet the regulatory requirements of each country (for example, Canada required that a different salt be used).[[27]](#endnote-27)

In 2014 alone, Indians consumed more than 400,000 tons (approximately 5,183,912,800 packets) of Maggi noodles, which were marketed in 10 varieties, paving the way for Maggi to be named one of India’s five most trusted brands.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Research indicated that India’s fast-growing noodle industry, which Maggi dominated, would be worth close to US$2 billion by 2019 (see Exhibit 2).[[29]](#endnote-29) Given India’s three-decade love affair with the two-minute noodles, many consumers were left dazed and confused by the Maggi crisis and potential ban. Many sought the product even though it had been pulled off the shelves by local authorities, with some citing 30 years of consumption as a testament to the product’s safety.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The competitors in the landscape

Because of its large consumer base, Nestlé’s Maggi noodles attracted several small competitors, such as Nissin Top Ramen and Foodles, all attempting to carve into Maggi’s market share.[[31]](#endnote-31) Apart from Maggie’s first-mover advantage and its novel introduction of a meal that could be prepared in two minutes, the continued success of Maggi in the Indian market could be attributed to its intensive research into developing flavours that consumers loved.[[32]](#endnote-32) However, trends showed that India’s love affair with noodles would continue to rise with or without Maggi, and that losing any market share to its competitors through an imposed ban could make a dent in Nestlé’s recovery plans (see Exhibit 3).[[33]](#endnote-33)

Furthermore, the drama following the Maggi mess led to a new competitor and a slew of resulting conspiracy theories involving Baba Ramdev, a yoga guru and entrepreneur who launched the Patanjali Ayurved (Patanjali) line of products. The brand was advertised as an all-natural, local alternative that was very inexpensive. Since posting ₹162.67 million (US$25 million) in sales in 2009, Patanjali reported sales upward of US$300 million for fiscal year 2014–15.

Patanjali had already chipped away at the market shares of Colgate and Unilever with its natural toothpaste products, forcing these multinational corporations (MNCs) to introduce their own natural products.[[34]](#endnote-34) Following Ramdev’s frequent diatribes against MNCs, he fired a warning shot to Nestlé: “Maggi should apologize, and if the government takes strong measures, the company should be asked to pack up and leave the country. We don’t need a company that serves poison.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

As the Maggi lead scare evolved, speculation grew on social media that Ramdev had orchestrated the scandal to come to the consumer’s rescue with his late-2015 launch of the all-natural Patanjali’s Atta noodles brand.[[36]](#endnote-36) Whether it was merely a confluence of circumstances or something more sinister remains a mystery.

Maggi in Hot Water: How the Crisis Unfolded

In March 2014, a food inspector in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, tested Maggi’s long-contested claim that its noodle products contained no added MSG.[[37]](#endnote-37) Two weeks later, the test results showed that the popular noodles did indeed contain MSG. If proven true, the infraction could result in a loss of trust for Nestlé India and a fine of approximately ₹290,000 (US$4,500).[[38]](#endnote-38) However, Nestlé India contested the results and asked for a retest of the product. The second test met numerous unexplained delays and a change of labs, from the northern city of Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, to a lab in Kolkata, West Bengal.[[39]](#endnote-39) Finally, almost a year after the first test, the Kolkata lab showed not only the presence of MSG in Maggi noodles but also a significant amount of lead—17.2 parts per million, or seven times the prescribed safe amount.[[40]](#endnote-40)

On May 6, 2015, the test results were leaked to the local press in Uttar Pradesh, and then went national with an article published in *The Times of India*.[[41]](#endnote-41) This revelation was followed by incessant coverage on India’s network television stations and social media.[[42]](#endnote-42) Nestlé India decided to follow its long-held tradition of handling the situation through official channels, conversing primarily with the food inspectors. Little effort was made to manage or control the narrative that was growing in the media and the public.[[43]](#endnote-43) Following an order by the local food and drug administration for a statewide ban of Maggi noodles in Uttar Pradesh on May 21, 2015, Nestlé India took to its online channels to reassure consumers of the safety of Maggi noodles and set up an FAQ page on its website.[[44]](#endnote-44) Later that month, the Uttar Pradesh regulators filed a court case to the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate, Barabanki, against Nestlé India, under the *Food Safety and Standards Act* of 2006.[[45]](#endnote-45) The crisis deepened as the government of Delhi enforced a 14-day ban on Maggi after unsafe levels of lead were discovered in 10 of 14 tested samples (see Exhibit 4).[[46]](#endnote-46) As a result of competing narratives adding further confusion, the national food regulators were under growing pressure to act. Through all these events, Nestlé, in its sparse online communications and press release, stood firm on its assertion that the product was safe to eat.

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

Monosodium glutamate (MSG) was commonly used as a flavour enhancer for canned vegetables, soups, and processed meats. While not regulated as a food additive, MSG had been tested worldwide by food and health regulators, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Health Canada, and had been declared safe to consume. However, some opinions suggested that the additive could cause adverse reactions, including headaches, chest pain, nausea, and potential damage to the nervous system.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Lead

Lead was a naturally occurring, ubiquitous metal that was present in air, water, soil, food, drinking water, and household dust.[[48]](#endnote-48) Due to its presence in the environment, acceptable, natural, low levels of lead were allowed in foods, as plants and animals naturally absorbed lead through the air, water, and soil.[[49]](#endnote-49) While lead poisoning was extremely rare, it was especially dangerous to children under the age of six and could severely affect mental and physical development. High concentrations of lead could be fatal. The acceptable level of lead in food was 2.5 parts per million.[[50]](#endnote-50)

India: Colonialism and Corporatism

India had a long and at times bitter history with the West, which started during the colonial era, when multiple European powers occupied parts of the country. Great Britain’s rule of India ended after the Second World War, but India’s brush with colonialism continued to shape many Indians’ views of the Western world.

Great Britain’s colonial history in India started with the exploits of the East India Company, an agent of Britain. At the height of its power, the East India Company subdued and extorted favourable trade concessions from the powerful Mughal dynasty on spices, cotton, silk goods, indigo, and saltpetre.[[51]](#endnote-51) It eventually gave way to British government rule. This progression of exploitation and rule paralleled the fears many Indians had of large, wealthy MNCs. A range of voices from academia and civil society suggested that the spread of transnational activities across the developing world was a modern form of colonialism.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The tenuous relationship between India and multinational corporations had burned major brands, such as Coca-Cola, which left India in 1977 rather than hand over the secret formula to its popular drink. When Coca-Cola returned decades later, both it and PepsiCo Inc. were briefly banned, as civil society groups and local communities charged that they sold poisonous substances and created pollution that caused water shortages in areas of operation.[[53]](#endnote-53)

India’s Media Landscape

News of the lead tests leaked to the Indian media on May 6, 2015, and the story soon became a national headline. The escalating media attention added vast pressure on all the actors involved, including the FSSAI and its recently appointed CEO, to reprimand Nestlé.

Many of the celebrities who had built Maggi’s brand for 30 years were also pressured to renounce the product. These celebrities included some of the most prolific actors in Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan, Madhuri Dixit, and Preity Zinta.[[54]](#endnote-54)

While tirades against Nestlé were frequently televised on major news talk shows, the controversy also exploded online. Several hashtags, including #[Maggi](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23Maggi&src=tyah), #[Maggiban](https://twitter.com/search?v=stream&q=%23MaggiBan&src=tyah&mode=photos), [#Maggiinasoup](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23MaggiInASoup&src=tyah&mode=photos), [#MaggiKeSideEffects](https://twitter.com/search?v=stream&q=%23MaggiKeSideEffects&src=tyah&mode=photos), and #MaggiMess, trended throughout May 2015.[[55]](#endnote-55) Users also took the opportunity to create humorous memes to poke fun at Maggi noodles and to criticize Indian authorities’ handling of the situation.[[56]](#endnote-56)

India had a vast multilingual media landscape with nearly 400 news channels.[[57]](#endnote-57) India also housed the second-largest Internet user base in the world. With 112 million Facebook users, India was expected to surpass the United States with the world’s largest Facebook user base by 2017.[[58]](#endnote-58) Indians also comprised 22.2 million users on Twitter.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Much of Nestlé’s battle to control the narrative on Maggi’s safety had been conducted via social media and online statements on Nestlé’s website, which included an FAQ page intended to provide clarity to customers on the situation.[[60]](#endnote-60) However, Nestlé had yet to converse with the mainstream media, which remained for most Indians the main vehicle for trusted news and information.

Nestlé Leadership Team

Bulcke took the helm at Nestlé in 2008 and was prepared for the controversies that are often attracted by organizations of Nestlé’s size. Nestlé’s Indian operation was headed by Etienne Benet, who began his stint in 2013 and had formerly worked in various regional roles for the multinational. The India team also consisted of the head of corporate affairs, Sanjay Khajuria, who was one of the first to hear about the Maggi test results. Thus far, Benet and his team had been reactive regarding this crisis.

The managing director of Nestlé Sri Lanka, Shivani Hegde, was often credited with having made Maggi noodles a household name across India and was a potential asset. Hegde ran the Maggie noodles brand for more than 15 years, and Bulcke referred to her as the “mother of Maggi Noodles in India.”[[61]](#endnote-61) Her new appointment in Sri Lanka materialized in early 2015. Hegde was a potential candidate to act as the face of the company throughout the crisis, as without the Bollywood brand ambassadors, Nestlé was, to the masses, yet another faceless company.[[62]](#endnote-62)

The Noodles Are Nearly Done

For a brand built on trust, the sagging consumer confidence and the impending local and global repercussions seemed disastrous. Bulcke and his team needed a compelling strategy to carry the prized Maggi brand through this no-win situation. They needed to quell consumer fears, pre-empt any negative global effect to Maggi and the larger Nestlé brand, and prepare to weather the decisions of government regulators. Time was ticking: Nestlé had already incurred losses in the Indian market, and it needed to act fast.

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EXHIBIT 1: NESTLÉ INDIA FINANCIAL RESULTS, 2014–2015



Note: \* 2014 included additional interim dividend of ₹ 10/- per share.

Source: Created by authors using data from Nestlé India Limited, *Annual Report 2015*, 15, accessed May 23, 2016, https://www.nestle.in/investors/stockandfinancials/documents/annual\_report/01\_nestle-india-annual-report-15.pdf.

EXHIBIT 2: India’s Noodle Market, 2009–2019 (in uS$ billion)



Source: Created by authors using data from “Market Size of Noodles in India from 2009 to 2019 (in billion U.S. dollars),” Statista, accessed November 27, 2017, https://www.statista.com/statistics/613179/noodle-market-size-india/.

EXHIBIT 3: NESTLÉ INDIA’s market share and change in sales, 2011–2015



Source: Created by authors using data from Erika Fry, “Nestlé’s Half-Billion-Dollar Noodle Debacle in India,” *Fortune*, April 26, 2016, accessed May 23, 2016, http://fortune.com/Nestle-maggi-noodle-crisis/.

**EXHIBIT 4: TIMELINE OF EVENTS RELATED TO THE MAGGI NOODLE ISSUE**

* March 10, 2014: A food inspector in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, decided to test Maggi’s claim that its noodles contained no MSG.
* March 24, 2014: Test results showed that Maggi noodles did contain MSG, which could result in a fine. Nestlé countered and asked the food inspectors to retest their product.
* March 31, 2015: The second test met numerous delays, but the results from a Kolkata-based lab showed that Maggi noodles contained not only MSG but also significant amounts of lead—about seven times the prescribed safe amount.
* May 6, 2015: The story leaked out to the local press in Uttar Pradesh.
* May 16, 2015: *The Times of India* published a report on Maggi’s lead and MSG findings, making it a national story.
* May 21, 2015: Uttar Pradesh food inspectors ordered a recall of Maggi noodles within the state.
* May 21, 2015: Nestlé rejected the accusation via a press release and used its online platforms to quell fears.
* June 1, 2015: Nestlé India reassured customers that lead found in the noodles was within safe levels.
* June 2, 2015: Nestlé India thanked its patrons for their loyalty and support.
* June 3, 2015: Nestlé launched a Maggi FAQ site on the official Nestlé website.
* June 3, 2015: Delhi government announced that 10 of 13 Maggi samples tested contained excess lead, leading to a 15-day ban.
* June 4, 2015: Uttarakhand, which neighboured the state of Uttar Pradesh, became the first state to ban Maggi products. Similar actions were discussed in other states, as demonstrations were held against Maggi noodles.
* June 4, 2015: Nestlé CEO Paul Bulcke arrived in India.

Notes: MSG = monosodium glutamate; FAQ = frequently asked questions; CEO = chief executive officer.

Source: Created by case authors using data from Erika Fry, “Nestlé’s Half-Billion-Dollar Noodle Debacle in India,” *Fortune*, April 26, 2016, accessed May 23, 2016, http://fortune.com/Nestle-maggi-noodle-crisis/.

ENDNOTES

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