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MNC in secret pact with universities for food education

Rema Nagarajan, TNN, Jan 24, 2011, 02:12am IST

Four public-funded national universities have entered into a "confidential" pact with Nestle, one of the biggest baby food and commercial food companies, for nutrition awareness programmes for adolescent school-going girls in government-run village schools.

Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) has written a letter to the secretary for school education and literacy, Anshu Vaish, protesting against "brand promotion using the public education system" and saying that the MoU (memorandum of understanding) was a clear case of conflict between public and corporate interests.

Nestle signed an MoU with Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) Ludhiana; National Dairy Research Institute, Karnal, Haryana; University of Mysore in Karnataka; and the GB Pant University for Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand. Under the MoU, Nestle staff along with the faculty of these universities launched a nutrition education programme. This joint initiative was launched in April 2009 by minister of state for rural development Agatha Sangma along with Nestle India chairman Helio Waszyk.

The MoU signed with PAU states: "This MoU, its existence and all information exchanged between the parties under this MoU or during the negotiations preceding this MoU is confidential to them and may not be shared with a third party." In keeping with this condition, PAU refused to give information when an RTI application was filed seeking information about the MoU and the details of the nutrition education programme.

The head of the department of nutrition in PAU, Dr J K Sangha, wrote to Nestle seeking its opinion on the RTI application for information and copies of documents pertaining to the MoU. In his reply dated July 1, 2010, the senior manager of corporate affairs in Nestle, Ajay Pal Singh Kang, wrote back stating: "We wish to inform you that all contents of the programme being conducted jointly by PAU and Nestle India have been specially developed by scientists and experts to be used exclusively to carry out the set objectives of the MoU. The contents of the programme are of commercial and confidential nature and the disclosure of which may harm our competitive position."

Therefore, we are constrained to decline our consent for the supply or disclosure, to any third party, of any information or document pertaining to this joint collaboration."

"Why should a national university have to take the permission of a private company to give information under the RTI Act? They are duty-bound to provide the information. After all, what is so secretive about the contents of a nutritional programme? They have sold their autonomy and independence as a national institution to a corporate entity for a paltry sum of Rs 2.5 lakh, the sum Nestle is paying PAU for this project," said Dr Arun Gupta, of BPNI.

The letter to the secretary questioned how a food corporation could use a public-funded institution for the promotion of their brand. "We believe that such sponsorship of education of adolescent girls who are future mothers will inevitably be biased towards the nutrition products of the company which comprise of breast milk substitutes, baby foods and instant snacks among others," stated the letter. BPNI wrote another letter on the same issue to HRD minister [Kapil Sibal](#). So far, there has been no response from the government.

Himanshu Manglik, communications manager of Nestle, when contacted, said that the nutrition education programme was a very good one and that the company had nothing to hide and was willing to share the contents of the programme with anyone who was interested.

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