



More than just water

The wellness quotient of water is being highlighted as it gets transformed into a nutrient-filled elixir that can deliver good health in liquid doses

Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink' — quoting the ancient mariner would not be out of place as humankind fights the scare of water scarcity. The world has plenty of water, but 97.5 per cent of it is saltwater. We depend on the remaining 2.5 per cent, of which only a minuscule fraction is accessible as groundwater to sustain life.

The bad news is that the availability of this water is coming under unprecedented strain due to population growth (6.4 billion and growing at 70 million a year), urbanisation (more than half the world's population now lives in cities) and climatic changes (which alter and adversely affect water cycles).

The problem of supply is exacerbated by worsening trends in

water quality, mostly in developing countries, with poorly planned industrialisation and inadequate infrastructure taking a toll. The paucity of potable water is especially evident in India, which recently ranked 120 in a list of 122 nations on the quality of its drinking water. Despite having 4 per cent of the world's freshwater, the average availability of water in India is shrinking steadily, putting it at risk of becoming a 'water-stressed' country by 2050.

In India, the excessive dependence on groundwater has unleashed a variety of contaminants — high nitrate levels due to fertilisers, septic tanks and sewage; the presence of arsenic, especially in the Indo-Gangetic plains; fluoride and iron; and hardness and salinity. The greater danger is microbial contamination, the silent killer that destroys life through diarrhoea, cholera and hepatitis. Taken together these diseases afflict some 40 million Indians every year.

Is water, then, the wellspring of life or the source of death? Despite the negatives there is hope. Governments around the world are starting to tackle the enormous challenge of water that confronts us all through a multitude of initiatives, including recycling, desalination, river linkages, rainwater harvesting and controlling climatic shifts. However, these initiatives need to gather traction and scale before they make an impact.



The awareness of the water crisis is by itself the small first step towards a larger leap in managing and mitigating the problem. While governments and civil society tackle the larger issue of water availability and purity, there is a growing awareness of the goodness of water — which constitutes 70 per cent of our body — in relation to everyday health and its life-sustaining virtues.

There has been a shift in perspective from water's thirst-quenching primacy to its ability to improve health, wellness and the overall quality of our lives, thus making it the ultimate solvent, the natural carrier and enabler for nutrients.

This more-than-just-water understanding is in sync with recent and rapid shifts in consumer trends, which have seen healthier drinks gaining in preference among consumers, made evident by the fast growth of bottled water, which has stolen space and market share from carbonated drinks.

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Bottled water is becoming a part of everyday life as consumers take a preventative and convenience-driven approach to consumption, while gradually internalising the healthy-science quotient that underpins the usefulness of this ultimate beverage.

The convergence of technology and the shift in consumer expectations and behaviour with regard to water consumption is unleashing a silent but extraordinarily powerful trend in this new human frontier, most notably in North America. Here, the focus is on water with next-generation nutrients and active ingredients that have the power to transform human lives for the better. This is coming to be known as the next-generation, nutritionally enhanced water experience.

There are different hierarchies of wellness in this new water paradigm:

- ▶ Basic drinkable water through the use of 'new-tech' sanitisation, with no fear of microbial contamination.
- ▶ Fortification of micronutrients without any taste downside.
- ▶ Meeting good health parameters through energy enhancers, vitamins and antioxidants, while building good taste and convenience.



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- ▶ Offering more wellness by targeting specific health concerns and satisfying greater expectations (like anti-ageing mechanisms).

Add to these the rapid development in the ability to decode the functioning of critical enzymes in human blood, which could open up avenues thus far hidden. As we progress in quantifying and qualifying water's intrinsic and other benefits, we will be in a position to profoundly affect the future of human health, especially in the areas of malnutrition, the prevention of disease and ageing. ●

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