

Heady days for Nutraceuticals

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Thanks to the growing acceptance of nutraceuticals, India could hope to leverage the country's key resources in this area to gain a foothold in the global market.

The first line of defense for most people struggling with stress and depression consists antidepressant medications. But some recent studies indicate that these drugs may not have much role in the prevention of stress and depression. However, the growing awareness of the serious side-effects of prescribed antidepressants has encouraged people to look for alternatives to maintain a healthy mood in less severe cases.

Nutraceuticals are among the New Age drugs that are being developed to provide better health. Nutraceuticals are gaining public acceptance in many developed countries in recent times. Could India become a major supplier of nutraceuticals to the world ?

What is the government's position on this? Explained RB Rawat , CEO of the National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB) of the government: "This board has recently been set by the Ministry of Health And Family Welfare. In November 2000, NMPB came into existence. The core area of focus for this Board is the growth of medicinal plants sector in India. The other objective of NMPB is to coordinate between all matters relating the medicinal plants, including drawing up of policies and strategies for conservation. Proper harvesting, cost-effective cultivation, research and development, processing and marketing of raw material are among few topics that we are looking on very carefully."

After giving a bird's eye view of NMPB, he also highlighted the importance of nutraceuticals into this segment. "If you see the

changing trends, the market of nutraceuticals has huge potential. These days industries are showing interest in the nutraceutical area. And that is a good sign. Within few years this potential can turn into a healthy growing market," stated Rawat.

Discussing the developments at NMPB, Rawat added, "At the national level 32 medicinal plants have been prioritized for development. The information on cultivation of 32 prioritized plants has been compiled and published as booklet entitled "Cultivation Practices of Some Commercially Important Medicinal Plants". Moreover, we have taken successful initiatives in forming 26 State Medicinal And Plant Boards to address the related issues for development and growth of medicinal plants sector in the country at the regional/state level."

A leading expert and the director of National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow, Dr P Pushpangadan explained the concept of nutraceuticals: "The nutraceuticals or the functional foods are majorly plant-based products and most of them being predominantly herbal. Hence clues to these nutraceutical products could be got from our ancient and traditional systems of medicine like Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani. The 'Rasayan' and 'Vajikarna' therapeutics of Ayurveda are essentially nutraceuticals and therefore there is ample scope for India to develop a range of nutraceutical/health food products. And to succeed, these products have to be standardized and with scientific validation to ensure safety and efficacy so as to instill confidence in the customers to use them not as an alternative medicine but as a well defined system of medicine. For this to happen, there has to be research carried out on these products. Thus India's own traditional knowledge base gathered from Unani, Ayurveda and Siddha can help out in research work on nutraceuticals. And we can take a lead on this from the western world."

Even after having core expertise in all the three fields—Unani, Ayurveda and Siddha, what is the status of Nutraceutical research work in India? Replying to this query, Dr Pushpangadan said, "There are a lot of products sold in the name of nutraceuticals in the Indian market. Close to around 100 products are even listed on the Internet along with the global companies and around 20 Indian companies have a record of producing nutraceuticals and marketing them globally. India is relatively a new market. The size of the Indian nutraceutical market is estimated to be about Rs 1,600 crore in 2001. All major pharma players are in the process of entering this market. The level of exports from India is still small, estimated to be perhaps less than Rs 750 crore, if one excludes Psyllium. The major markets for India are the US, Europe and Japan."

Talking about nutraceuticals' acceptability among Indian consumers and researchers, Dr Pushpangadan added, "Definitely this nutraceutical concept is catching up in India as well. The growth rate of catching trend is also impressive. This is evident with the increase in the number of companies investing in this herbal drug industry. As far as research community is concerned, they are also showing great interest in this, but establishing a state-of-the-art modern laboratory for undertaking research on nutraceuticals will cost at least Rs 10 crore. That might be one reason that only few major players of the Indian healthcare/pharma industry are coming into this foray."

Commenting on the scope of nutraceuticals, director of Pharmacopoeial Laboratory for Indian Medicine (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare), Dr RU Ahmad stated, "Herbal medication has gained popularity into the area of cosmetics. People are now showing their interest in herbal applications into other forms as well. Nutraceuticals is one of the examples of options that can be availed easily for securing peaceful and healthy life. India can become leader in this field as we holds key expertise as well as we are rich with the biodiversity."

Dr Ahmad also said, "There is a gap in attitude of our's and the west. We always follow what the western community has already achieved. The Indian industry needs to grow more mature." However, comments from the industry drivers on this subject can be very critical and vital for the curious people about nutraceuticals. Head of the Research and Development initiative of Flex Foods Ltd, Dr S D Garg, expressed his confidence in nutraceuticals and said, "Nutraceuticals has a big international market, no doubt about this. In India, the market is negligible. This is an area from where we can achieve excellence. All that is required at this moment is our efforts in the correct direction." Hopefully, a "Shining India" will soon gather the momentum required to make a global mark in this sector too.

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