

Tiding On Immunity Syndrome: Indian Consumers Deserve A Better Deal

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Then only Indian consumers will get a fair deal apart from establishing these desi brands in International arena.

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23 February, 2021 by Pankaj Priya

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The present pandemic has negatively impacted consumption in all categories except those related to immunity and wellness. This recent boost for enhanced immunity seeking measures among consumers all over the world as well as in India have resulted in many marketers of all hues jumping on this bandwagon offering varied immunity and health solutions. As far as Indian market is concerned, Chywanprash, Kadha, Honey and Health supplements in the consumption category and Hand sanitizer, Face masks and Surface sanitizers in the usage category have been the major or an additional revenue earner for Indian marketers. But are the Indian consumers really getting their money's worth?

Reports of major brands of honey failing the purity test by CSE Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), 'Chywanprash' and 'Kadha' offering varied permutation and combination of unstandardized ingredients and unverified claims of many health supplements have raised a question mark on the ethical aspect of doing business for food marketers in India. How many Honey brands meet the standard 'C4' sugar limit or have passed the stringent NMR (nuclear magnetic resonance) test? How many labs or accreditation bodies are there to certify these standards? What is their credibility? Why the brands which claim to fall on the

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right side of a particular certifying body fail to qualify as a quality product by another agency? When Government's regulatory authority FSSAI have specified acceptable physicochemical parameters for Honey and other naturally sourced food products then why are these adulteration being reported on a regular basis?

As far as Kadha is concerned, camouflaging the product with the prefix "Ayush" to convey the impression that it is certified by Ayush ministry is a common practice among many players whereas the ministry had only encouraged consuming homemade Kadha (a generic formulation as per Ayurveda) for boosting immunity.

Chyawanprash being the oldest Ayurvedic immunity booster to be commercialised, still lacks credibility as none of the marketers specify the source of ingredients, which would convey its quality and many do not even mention the proportion of each ingredient on their label. Similar ambiguity exists about the quality of packaging. Can these products provide the same consumption value under different packaging? This is another grey area in the marketers' offerings.

The key stakeholders (on the offering side of the spectrum) in elevating these business vertical are the brand marketers and the food regulatory authority of India i.e. FSSAI. As these products are all processed from natural sources, marketers should realise that maintaining and communicating a transparent value chain from the farm to the dining table would actually add credibility to their claim of quality. The new commercial from Dabur and Patanjali honey and minor references regarding the same by some others in their advertisements is the first step in this direction, but a lot is desired. It is to be remembered that India has a rich base of flora and fauna, therefore specifying the plants from which the honey has been sourced would be more desirable. The above move would also ensure that the marketers shift the competition from price based one to value based one providing benefits to all stakeholders, not just the consumers. The ramifications of this move would ensure backward integration with farmers through contract farming, providing additional revenue for some farmers and may be key source of revenue for the marginal farmers, especially in tribal regions. An example of a transparent supply chain is the famous wine of France where the labels on the packaging mention the vineyard from where they were sourced. The benefits are accrued by the farm owners as well as the marketers, as the 'brand' of the wine encompasses and communicates the contribution of both the stakeholders.

This explicit presence of farm owners in the 'brand' only encourage them to hone their entrepreneurship skills in production and selling to various marketers. A true competition emerges in the process with every marketer vying to source their raw material from the farms supplying the quality produce. Similar model, if replicated in India can go a long way in reducing the woes of many farmers who are not engaged in paddy or cereals farming and aid in generating a decent revenue for them, given the increased demand for quality food products. Processing and packaging methods adhering to either modern scientific or ayurvedic prescriptions or maybe both, depending on their USP or positioning in the market would only justify the robustness of the marketers' claims of purity. Rather time has come to go beyond mere purity and incorporate efficacy as a key attribute of these immunity boosting food products in their brand. This would encourage research on introducing new formulations and better acceptance by the consumers, hit hard by recurring emergence of new viruses over the years. Moreover, this advancement in the value chain would be a logical step depicting the evolution of this category from level of basic product to augmented product. For e.g. some natural products can be augmented based on the variety of source from where they were procured or whether they are organic i.e. unprocessed or inorganic in nature.

FSSAI, a body created by the Ministry of food processing few years ago has come up with specific standards for various products over the years, but their norms for standardisation and strict implementation of the same by all players need quantum leap given the changed scenario post pandemic. Indian consumers being more sensitive towards immunity are seeking more information about the genuineness of their product. Why should the Indian marketers have to certify their product from foreign lab? Are our Indians lab not trustworthy or do they lack the required expertise? As seen in the recent case of honey where a known brand claimed that they meet the FSSAI standards but were found to be adulterated by CSE, so does it mean that FSSAI has specified very diluted norms?

Indian society boasts of myriad traditional recipes, each providing physical, mental and emotional benefits as well as taste gratification. We can always leverage this community expertise and knowledge to create a strong avenue for exports, an opportunity further facilitated by a large Indian diaspora worldwide. Therefore, it is imperative that both the major stakeholders i.e. the Indian marketers and FSSAI reformulate their acts together to establish these 'desi' products on the international platform. FSSAI should come up with more stringent certification norms so as to be seen as the supreme authority on certifying quality food products, recommend their parent ministry to invest in capacity building of our various labs for testing on advance metrics as well as efficacy measurement of health supplements and immunity boosters. Our marketers on the other hand, should be transparent about their value chain and value add their offerings by communicating the efficacy of their products based on real life trial usage on a large sample akin to the one being done in the case of new vaccines or drugs.

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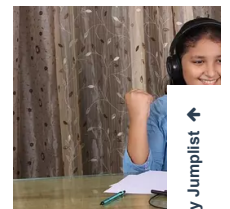
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