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Probiotics emerging as next sunrise industry

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With increasing focus on overall wellness, consumers are seeking out healthier options in food products. Demand is strong for functional food ingredients, particularly those that can support digestive health. Because immune health is rooted in maintaining a healthy balance in the gut microbiome, supporting digestive health has benefits for immunity too. Among the best-known functional foods, prebiotics and probiotics are fast gaining popularity.

Consumers' rush towards healthier, natural, and better-for-you options can lead to formulation opportunities with probiotics in foodservice. Probiotics are also available in dietary supplements, baked goods, meat, and topical probiotic products.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines probiotics as live microorganisms which, when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host. In addition to probiotics, prebiotics is equally essential when it comes to the application. Probiotic products are to be administered in an appropriate quantity and with a suitable carrier. Prebiotics are dietary substances that serve as food for probiotics and help support beneficial bacteria and other organisms to metabolize in the gut.

The Indian probiotics market is presently in its nascent stages and remains primarily focused on digestive and immune health. Liquid probiotics continue to dominate the market with probiotic-infused juices, beverages, milk, and yogurt-based drinks. Traditionally, *dahi* or curd has been consumed as part of the daily meal across many Indian households in various forms like raita, lassi, chaas, and shrikhand. The same is now being packaged and presented to the savvy Indian consumer as an on-the-go snack in healthy 'spoonable' and 'drinkable' variants, packed with a balanced mix of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, minerals, and vitamins infused with specific spore-forming and vegetative probiotics.

Leading brands in this segment include Epigamia, which has introduced India's first lactose-free curd. Yakult Danone India is another key player with its signature probiotic drink Yakult. Apart

from these, many FMCG giants and pharmaceutical firms have also made a beeline to tap the budding demand several beverages, plant-based milk, snacks, and neutral are being infused with certain stable probiotics in individual and in compatible blend forms. In the niche segment, fermented health drinks such as kombucha, kefir, and miso, and fermented salads like kimchi and sauerkraut are gradually making way to the Indian kitchen.

However, the market remains mostly underpenetrated, as there is much scope for growth. In the future, the demand for probiotic products and dietary supplements is expected to notch higher amidst growing awareness and rising instances of lifestyle-related disorders. The country also lags in terms of women's health and child nutrition. In this space, too, the need for supplementary nutrition is likely to spur the demand for probiotics.

There has been growing concern about probiotic supplements' efficacy, with researchers claiming that over-the-counter probiotics that promise to improve gut health do not provide consistent results. This is because most traditional probiotics cannot make it to the intestine as they are destroyed in the stomach itself by the gastric acids. However, spore-forming or ground-based probiotics are highly resistant to stomach acids and have proven to promote gut health more effectively.

Several encapsulations and coating mechanisms have come up to break this myth. Isolation of probiotics from several natural resources is in-progress worldwide, and we now have many stable and sustainable probiotics range. In this regard, India, which primarily produces spore containing probiotics, enjoys an upper hand.

As India emerges as a global hub for probiotic products, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) guidelines and the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) have ensured that India's probiotic foods match global quality standards. This, along with government thrust to boost investment in the pharma sector, augur well for the probiotics industry, which could well be the country's next sunrise industry in the days to come.

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