NUFFOODS Spectrum
perspectives on food technologies & business
ASIA

The End of the Wellness Adjective

04 August 2026 | Views | By Dr. Milind Kokje, Chief Editor, NUFFOODS Spectrum

FSSAI's notices to more than fifteen food businesses signal the end of claim-led marketing. For an industry that has grown on consumer aspiration, scientific substantiation is no longer a compliance cost. It is the only durable competitive advantage left.



"Healthy." "Natural." "Organic." "Vegan." "Zero maida." For nearly two decades, adjectives like these have done a great deal of commercial heavy lifting on Indian food labels, and they have done it largely unchallenged. That era is now drawing to a close.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has launched a determined drive against food business operators over misleading labels and unsubstantiated health and nutrition claims. It marks a meaningful shift in the country's regulatory landscape, and far from being a cause for anxiety, this intensified scrutiny deserves a warm welcome. It is a catalyst for scientific excellence, for consumer trust, and ultimately for India's global competitiveness.

In its recent action, the regulator issued notices to more than fifteen food businesses, cracking down on misleading brand names and exaggerated product and health claims. Several companies had reportedly used precisely those descriptors, "healthy", "organic", "vegan" and "zero maida", on their products without the required certification or approval. In doing so, they violated FSSAI rules and risked deceiving the very consumers they sought to win over.

To appreciate why this matters, it helps to remember just how far this market has come. India is today one of the world's fastest-growing nutraceutical and health food markets. Over nearly two decades, it has thrived on consumer aspirations for better health, powered by growing health awareness, rising disposable incomes, an ageing population and the mounting burden of lifestyle diseases. Consumers are actively seeking products for immunity, gut health, cognitive performance, metabolic wellness, healthy ageing and preventive care.

Yet this very surge in demand has had an unwelcome side effect. It has encouraged exaggerated or poorly substantiated claims from many operators. Generic expressions such as "clinically proven", "natural detox" and "immune booster", along with phrases like "supports liver health", "improves vitality" and simply "healthy", now appear routinely on product labels, in advertisements and across digital platforms. The centre of gravity is shifting. Persuasive marketing alone can no longer

define the marketplace. Scientific substantiation, or the lack of it, increasingly will.

The concern is not with the ingredients themselves. Many products do contain scientifically validated ingredients. The problem lies in the gap between what the label promises and what the finished product actually delivers, and that gap has varied considerably. In some cases the claim on the label is simply absent from the product altogether. The packaging of one product, for instance, featured images of vegetables that were reportedly never declared in the ingredient list.

Other examples are equally telling. In some cases a label claimed the presence of certain vitamins without declaring their quantity. In one instance a vitamin was declared, but without the required percentage of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA). The regulator also objected to the phrase "Made with Organic Vegetables" on a product that lacked the prescribed organic certification marks and the Jaivik Bharat logo. A "Plant-based vegan" claim fell short on similar grounds.

What ties these cases together is a single, clarifying principle. Health claims must rest on robust scientific evidence, not on marketing narratives. This is an important moment for the sector. It signals the maturation of India's food regulatory ecosystem, and it brings us closer to the frameworks of developed economies, where health claims are subjected to rigorous scientific evaluation before they ever reach the consumer.

For any industry players who feel apprehensive about the FSSAI's actions, the most useful response is to see them as an opportunity. Stronger evidence requirements are not anti-industry. They are pro-market. Every exaggerated claim that fails to deliver chips away at consumer confidence, and the damage rarely stays contained. When one product overpromises and underdelivers, the whole category pays the price in lost trust. Once that trust begins to erode, the consequences reach well beyond any single brand. A loss of scientific credibility is, in the end, a genuine threat to the nutraceutical business as a whole.

There is a fair point to acknowledge here. Some experts note that terms like "natural", "multi-grain" and "farm fresh" carry no strict legal definition. Where such gaps genuinely exist, they can be addressed through the proper consultative process that brings stakeholders to the table. Some in the industry will still view tighter oversight as an added compliance burden. In reality, it may prove to be the strongest driver of meaningful innovation. Scientific credibility is no longer merely a regulatory obligation. It is fast becoming the industry's most valuable competitive advantage, because markets function efficiently only when consumers can trust the information placed before them.

Stricter oversight also nudges companies toward genuinely differentiated, science-backed products. That, in turn, calls for a shift in investment, away from advertising and toward R&D, clinical studies and real evidence generation. Companies that commit to well-designed clinical studies, transparent ingredient sourcing, standardisation, quality assurance and evidence-based communication will be far better placed to build lasting relationships with consumers.

It is worth remembering what consumers actually buy. They do not purchase individual ingredients or compounds. They purchase finished formulations. Variations in ingredient quality, standardisation, production processes and dosage can all significantly influence efficacy. This is precisely why future investment must flow toward formulation-specific clinical validation rather than ingredient-level claims alone.

India brings real strengths to this transition. It has rich biodiversity, deep traditional knowledge and a growing research infrastructure. But those advantages, on their own, are no longer enough. International markets increasingly demand standardised ingredients, traceable supply chains, Good Manufacturing Practices, validated analytical methods and clinically substantiated health claims.

Seen in this light, the regulators' sharper vigilance on labels and advertising is not a constraint but an opportunity to redefine the future of India's nutra and health food sector. Scientific credibility, regulatory integrity and commercial success are not competing objectives. They are mutually reinforcing pillars of a mature, globally respected industry.

The wellness adjective, unsupported and unearned, is on its way out. What replaces it is evidence. If Indian manufacturers embrace that shift proactively rather than reluctantly, they can build a reputation as producers of high-quality, science-backed nutraceuticals, fully capable of competing in the world's most demanding and highly regulated export markets.