

Lord Dhanvantari's Well of Life in Varanasi: Sacred Waters, Healthy Guts

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Abstract

Review Article

The world's oldest living city, Varanasi, also known as Shiva's city, has been the cradle of Indian civilization since times immemorial. At one time, the city was ruled by the greatest physician of all times, Lord Dhanvantari. It was probably in that era that a well of health-giving waters was created, such that anyone suffering from intestinal disorders could get cured simply by drinking the water of the Dhanvantari well for 4-6 weeks. This property of the well water can be easily understood if we take into account how minerals contained in drinking water affect the gut microbes, and also influence gut health. Trace elements are crucial for maintaining good health, and this article has briefly described the mechanisms underlying this simple principle.

Keywords: Trace elements, gut microbiome, Lord Dhanvantari, five sacred metals, Rishi Markanda.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ancient city of Varanasi, renowned for its spiritual energy and healing traditions, holds within it a less known yet deeply revered site: the Dhanvantari Well. Located inside the precincts of the Mrityunjay Mahadev Temple, the well is named after Lord Dhanvantari, the divine physician and the God of Ayurveda. The Skanda Purana and local legends claim that the well, blessed by Dhanvantari, is a source of restorative waters, blended from underground streams [1]. Pilgrims and tourists flock to experience its reputed therapeutic benefits amidst Varanasi's rich spiritual and cultural tapestry.

It has now been established that minerals naturally present in drinking water, such as magnesium, calcium, potassium, zinc, iron, and trace elements like manganese and selenium, play a vital role in supporting a healthy gut microbiome [2,3]. These minerals act as essential cofactors for enzymatic activities in intestinal microbial metabolism, promoting the growth of beneficial gut bacteria such as *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*. For example, magnesium supports microbial diversity, while certain minerals influence the pH and ionic balance within the intestinal tract, creating an environment that discourages the overgrowth of pathogenic bacteria. Moreover, zinc and selenium enhance the resilience of the gut lining and modulate inflammatory responses. Studies suggest that regular

intake of mineral-rich water can improve microbial richness and stability, which is linked to improved digestion, enhanced immunity, and reduced risk of metabolic and inflammatory diseases. Thus, drinking water enriched with bioavailable minerals can contribute significantly to gut health and overall well-being.

2. Sacred Origins

Located close to the Kashi Vishwanath temple, the Dhanvantari well is steeped in legend. It is believed that Lord Dhanvantari blessed this water source with healing potential during his divine incarnation. For centuries, Ayurvedic healers have used the water for its therapeutic effects, especially for digestive ailments-aligning with Dhanvantari's role as the guardian of health in Ayurveda. Ayurvedic practitioners still recommend the water for internal cleansing rituals and the preparation of herbal decoctions targeting gut and metabolic health. The well water is also used during Dhanvantari Jayanti, when devotees offer prayers and consume small quantities of the water as a symbolic and therapeutic act. The Dhanvantari Mandir, dedicated to Lord Dhanvantari, is located nearby in the Dhanvantari Niwas, in close vicinity to the Mrityunjay Mahadev temple.

There is mention of one legendary king of Varanasi named as Dhanvantari in the ancient scriptures.

Known as Kasiraj Dhanvantari or Divodasa Dhanvantari, he is considered the father of Ayurveda, especially of surgery in the Indian medical system [4]. He is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and emerged from the churning of the ocean of milk (*Samudra Manthan*) holding a pot of Amrita (nectar of immortality), a conch shell, a leech, and various herbs in his hands, alongwith a text on Ayurveda (Figure 1). The

era of his rule is estimated to be around the 2nd century BCE, though he probably reigned much before that. Divodasa Dhanvantari is recognized for composing the Ayurvedic treatise, the Dhanvantari Nighantu, which is one of the earliest known works on Ayurveda [5]. The text includes descriptions of various medicinal plants and Ayurvedic formulations, as well as instructions for the diagnosis and treatment of various diseases.

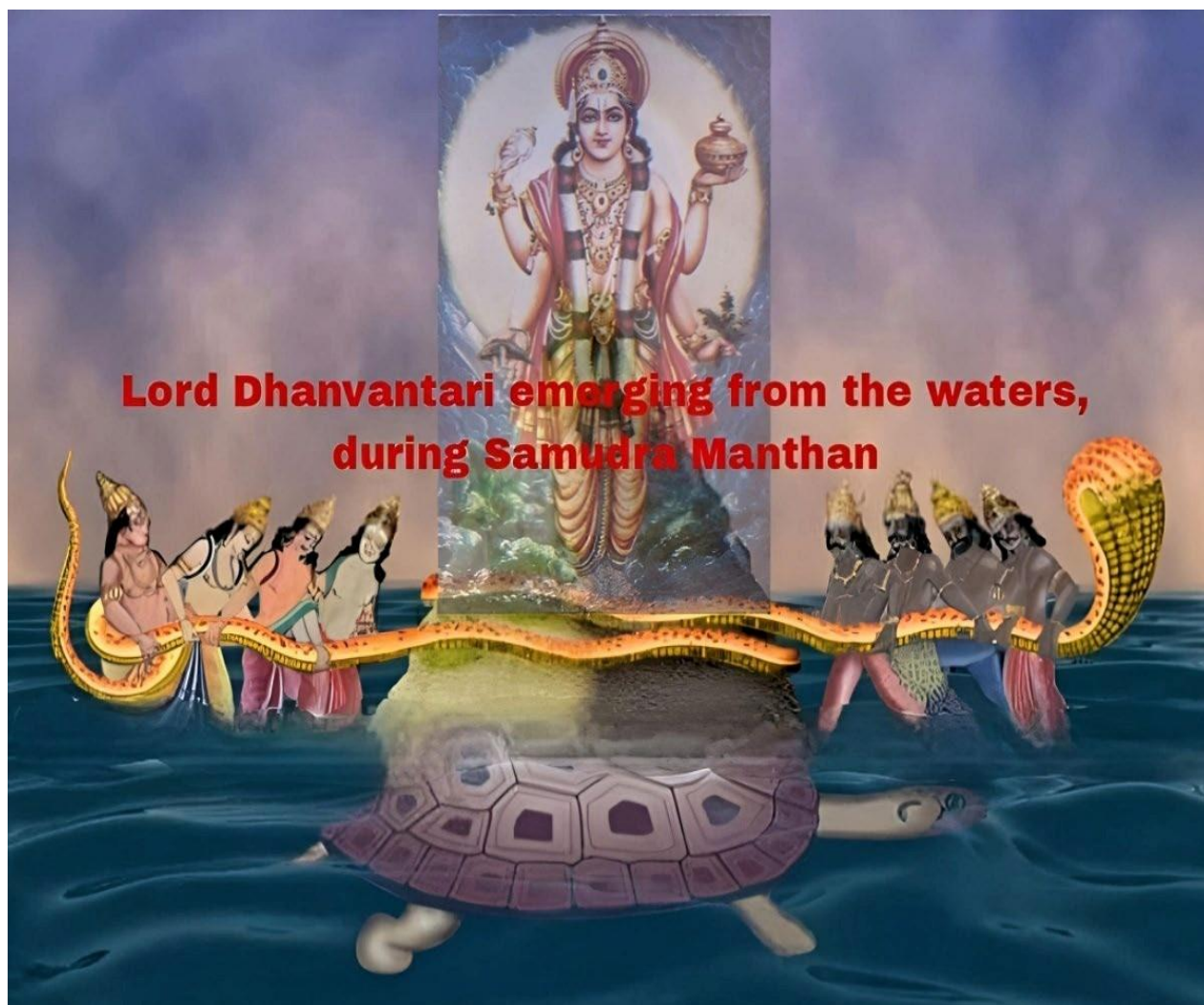


Figure 1. Lord Dhanvantari emerged from the Ocean of Milk, when it was being churned

3. Various sources of health-giving water

All over the world, there are a large number of water sources which are believed to have healing powers, including Chalybeate springs and wells, hot sulphur springs, saline springs, alkaline springs, radon springs, and many others. Chalybeate springs are natural mineral water springs rich in iron salts (especially ferrous iron), and are believed to have healing properties, especially for anaemia, skin disorders and digestive health. The word “chalybs” comes from Latin, meaning steel/iron. Hot springs are naturally occurring geothermal springs

where water is naturally heated by various proposed mechanisms, including radio-activity. These are rich in minerals such as sulphur, calcium and silica. Water from hot springs is usually sourced into water tanks and used for relaxation, spa therapy, muscle pain relief and skin healing. Minerals in the water from chalybeate springs oxidize into ferric iron (Fe^{3+}) and manganese oxides ($\text{Mn}^{3+}/\text{Mn}^{4+}$), which precipitate as rust and dark oxides, giving springs their characteristic coloration (Figure 2).

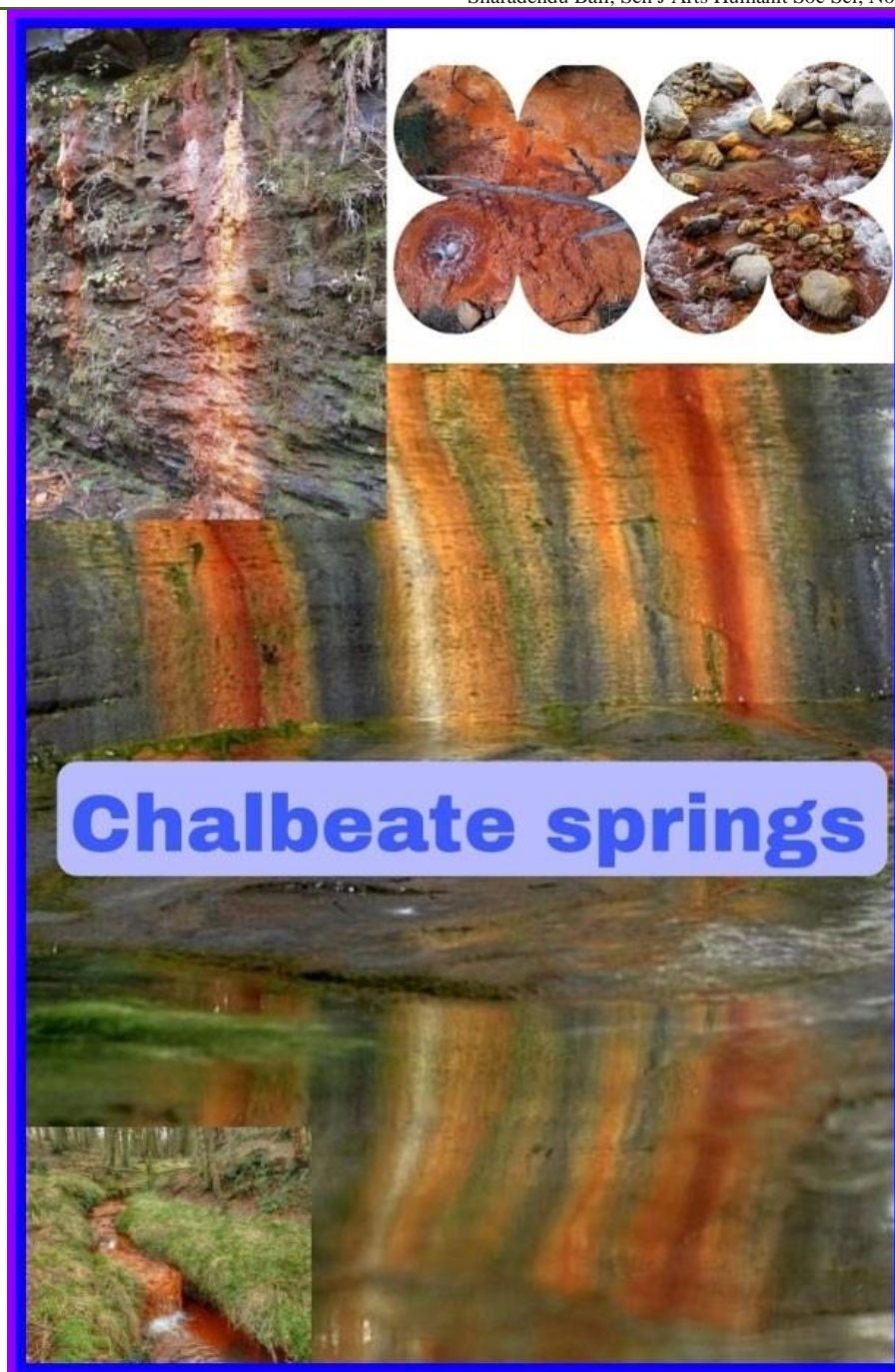


Figure 2. Chalbeate springs are found in several places, and their waters have healing properties. On exposure to air, the soluble minerals get oxidized, and precipitate, leading to varied hues

Notable wells in India reputed to have healing powers

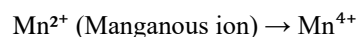
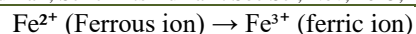
Several wells in India are believed to have healing properties, based on local beliefs, mineral content, and historical records. Notable among these are Dhanvantari Well in Varanasi; Baidyanath Well in Deoghar, Jharkhand; Neem kund well in Ambaji temple region, Gujarat; the Sambhar Saline Wells near Sambhar Salt Lake, Rajasthan; Vajreshwari Hot Wells near Mumbai; Fluoride Wells in Nalgonda, Telangana; Rameswaram Temple Wells, and the Tirtha Kund Wells at Mahalakshmi Temple, Kolhapur in Maharashtra.

The Herbal Wells located in the Tribal Belt in Bastar; Chhattisgarh & Odisha are special cases in the context of herbs. These herbal wells are located in dense forested areas, and the water is presumed to get infused with compounds contained in underground roots of herbs like Ashwagandha, Shatavari, and Amla. Waters of these wells are used by tribal healers for boosting immunity, enhancing energy levels, and aiding in recovery from various illnesses.

4. Why Iron & Manganese Stay Dissolved in Deep Underground Springs

Redox Chemistry of Fe and Mn

In the reducing (low-oxygen) conditions underground, iron (Fe) and manganese (Mn) exist in their ferrous (Fe^{2+}) and manganous (Mn^{2+}) forms, both soluble in water (Figure 3). When these waters reach the surface and contact oxygen, the ions oxidize into ferric iron (Fe^{3+}) and manganese oxides ($\text{Mn}^{3+}/\text{Mn}^{4+}$), which precipitate as rust and dark oxides. The chemical reactions are shown below:



The waters of the Dhanvantari well, emerging from deep underground, thus contain iron and manganese in soluble ionic form, which are readily absorbed by the intestinal cells (lining columnar epithelium), as well as by the gut flora existing in the intestinal lumen.

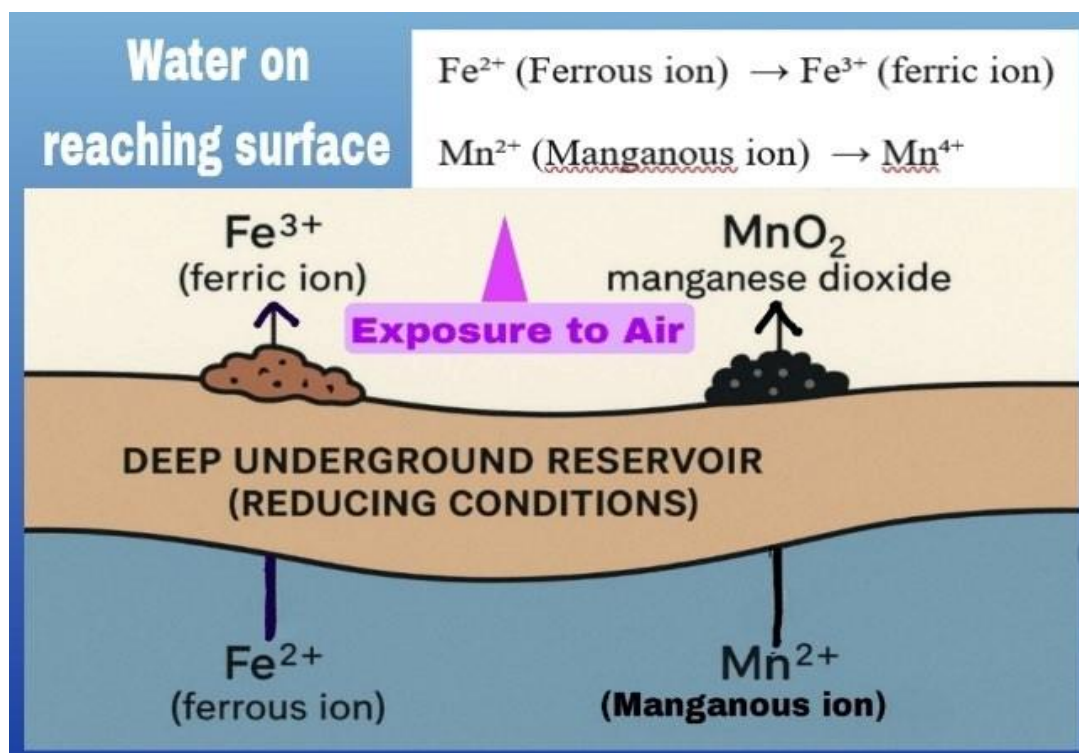


Figure 3: Deep underground water reservoirs contain minerals in soluble state, due to anaerobic conditions. On reaching the surface (by pumping), the soluble ions get oxidized and become insoluble, due to contact with oxygen.

5. Mineral-rich waters and their impact on gut microbiome and general health

What sets the Dhanvantari Well apart is the unique composition of minerals naturally infused into its waters (Figure 4). These minerals are believed to seep in from ancient underground strata rich in deposits of trace elements, located at the base of the well, making the water a natural prebiotic solution that can support and modulate the human gut microbiome. The mechanisms

by which trace elements affect the gut microbiome and the human body systems, is summarized below.

- Magnesium - essential for enzyme function and bowel regularity
- Manganese - a cofactor in antioxidant enzymes produced by gut microbes
- Iron - required for microbial respiration and growth
- Calcium and Zinc - known to support microbial diversity and intestinal barrier integrity



Figure 4. The Dhanvantari *koop* (well) is located inside the precincts of the Mrityunjay Mahadev Temple, Varanasi. It is an apt location for the well, since Mrityunjaya means victory over death.

Potential Gut Health Benefits

- Microbial Diversity Enhancement:** The trace minerals may help foster a healthy microbiota balance, supporting beneficial bacteria like *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*.
- Enzyme Support and Digestion:** Magnesium and manganese in the water act as cofactors for various microbial and host digestive enzymes [6].
- Reduction of Gut Inflammation:** Minerals such as zinc and iron are known to modulate intestinal immunity, potentially reducing dysbiosis and inflammation [7].
- Natural Detoxification:** The alkaline nature and mineral composition may help reduce toxic bacterial metabolites by promoting favourable gut flora.
- Improved Nutrient Absorption:** Mineral-enriched water can enhance the mucosal lining's function, improving the uptake of nutrients from food [8,9].

6. Embedding of five Sacred metals in the base of well: Possible reason why the waters of Dhanvantari well are Therapeutic

The chemical basis of why water in deep aquifers contains trace elements in soluble (usable) ionic form is described in section 4. Besides this, it is quite possible that Lord Dhanvantari, being the fountain head of Ayurvedic knowledge, utilized the *Bhasmas* of the five sacred metals in order to make the well waters

medicinal. These calcined metals may have been incorporated in proper proportions, and in large quantities while laying the foundation for the base of the well, so that when the water from underground aquifers flowed through these *bhasmas* into the well, minute amounts of the latter got dissolved in the water.

In Indian tradition, the concept of five sacred metals (often called *Pañcaloha* or *Panchadhatu* — "five elements/alloys") is deeply symbolic. In temples, these five metals are especially used in making *murti* (idols) of deities; ornaments of deities, such as amulets and crowns; religious ritual implements such as panchapatra (vessel), lamps (*diyas*), *kamandalu* and *yantras*; and temple bells to produce resonant vibrations.

Each of the five metals corresponds to one the five Mahābhūtas — the great elements that constitute the physical and spiritual universe as given below:

- Earth (Prithvi) → Copper
- Water (Jala) → Silver
- Fire (Agni) → Gold
- Air (Vāyu) → Iron
- Ether (Ākāśa) → Lead/Zinc/Tin

The *Bhasmas* (Calcined incinerated formulations of the metals, prepared by tedious processes taking weeks or months) created out of these five sacred metals, possess immense health value, as shown in Table

1. Though toxic if ingested as such, the *bhasmikarana* process purifies the toxic minerals and metals by transforming them into fine, biologically compatible

nanoparticles through repeated cycles of heat treatment (calcination) and trituration with herbal extracts.

Table 1

Sacred Metal	Sanskrit Name	Common Bhasma	Ayurvedic Actions / Indications	Elemental Association
Gold	<i>Suvarna</i>	Suvarna Bhasma	Rasāyana (rejuvenator), Medhya (enhances intellect), Balya (strength-giving), Vrishya (aphrodisiac); used in debility, cardiac weakness, tuberculosis, and mental disorders.	Fire (Agni) – Ojas, vitality [10,11].
Silver	<i>Rajatam</i>	Rajat Bhasma	Pittashāmaka (pacifies pitta), Hridya (cardiotonic), Jvaraghna (antipyretic), used in burning sensations, hypertension, epilepsy, and reproductive health.	Water (Jala) – Cooling, calmness [12, 13]
Copper	<i>Tāmra</i>	Tāmra Bhasma	Deepana (digestive stimulant), Lekhana (fat-reducing), used in liver disorders, obesity, anemia, respiratory and metabolic diseases.	Earth (Prithvi) – Stability, metabolism [14,15]
Iron	<i>Loha / Ayas</i>	Loha Bhasma	Raktavardhaka (blood-forming), Rasayana (anti-aging), useful in anemia, jaundice, diabetes, and general weakness.	Air (Vāyu) – Circulation, strength [16]
Lead	<i>Nāga / Śisaka</i> (also includes <i>Yashada</i> = Zinc)	Nāga Bhasma or Yashada Bhasma	Useful in urinary disorders, diabetes, spermatorrhea. Yashada: in skin diseases, eye disorders, diabetes, wound healing.	Ether (Ākāśa) – Regeneration, subtle balance [17]

It may be appropriate to mention here that the great Rishi Markandey, who is probably the only personality in the history of mankind to have attained victory over Yama, the God of Death, buried the five sacred metals at Mount Agung in Bali Island, before proceeding to build temples and irrigation channels (18). Bali island is probably the only other place, apart from mainland India, where Hinduism is being practiced since times immemorial, the foundation of which was laid by the immortal sage Markandey.

CONCLUSION

The Dhanvantari Well of Varanasi stands as a testament to the ancient integration of geology, spirituality, and healing. Created by the Lord of Medicine himself, this sacred well is not only a centre of spiritual faith but is increasingly being appreciated for its natural mineral-rich water believed to cure ailments. The mineral-rich waters provide trace elements that promote and harmonize gut ecology, by supporting the gut microbiome, an idea that bridges traditional wisdom with emerging science. It is now being increasingly appreciated that the linkages between the gut microbiome and vital organs such as the brain and lung, known respectively as the Gut-brain axis and the Gut-lung axis, are vital for maintaining good health. For those seeking a holistic approach to digestive and microbial health, this sacred spring offers a unique and meaningful destination.

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