Sources and leaching of nitrate contamination in groundwater

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Nitrate is an important and widespread contaminant of groundwater and surface water resources. Nitrate formed either by the natural processes (atmospheric fixation, lightning storms) or added through anthropogenic activities (fertilizer applications, septic tanks) enters the hydrosphere with virtual ease. In this article we review various concepts discussing the different sources behind elevated nitrate levels. Moreover, an attempt is also made towards preparing a comprehensive framework to understand the leaching of nitrate in groundwater. This framework would effectively help in understanding the origin and dynamics controlling the fate of nitrate in groundwater, which is vital for managing the associated risks and safeguarding the water supplies.

Keywords: Geogenic sources, groundwater pollution, methemoglobinemia, mineral weathering, nitrate contamination.

NITRATE (NO$_3^-$), the second most common chemical contaminant of groundwater after pesticides has attracted considerable attention. Nitrate, nitrite (NO$_2^-$), ammonia (NH$_3$) and organically bound forms of nitrogen (Org-N) are the species of concern for water resource management in various parts of the world. The background nitrate concentration (naturally occurring nitrate) in groundwater shall not exceed 10 mg/l and the levels exceeding this background limit are an indicator of nitrate contamination primarily through various anthropogenic activities. Although this background concentration cannot be considered of pristine state, the contribution from geogenic sources of nitrate cannot be ignored.

Nitrate may enter the human body through endogenous and exogenous pathways, and it becomes toxic when nitrate is reduced to nitrite in the oral cavity. In moderate amounts, nitrate is a harmless constituent of food and water, hence a permissible limit of 50 mg/l as nitrate ion (or 11 mg/l as nitrate-nitrogen) in drinking water is specified by the World Health Organization (WHO) to protect against methemoglobinemia in bottle-fed neonates. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has set the maximum contaminant level as 10 mg/l of nitrate as nitrogen in the United States, whereas in India, the acceptable limit by the Bureau of Indian Standard (BIS) is 45 mg/l as nitrate (IS 10500:2012).

Ingestion of water having nitrate concentration up to 45 mg/l has no severe health impact. Although the ingested concentration increases the probability of blue baby syndrome (methemoglobinemia) in bottle-fed neonates, the older children (aged 1–7 years) are also affected by the blue baby syndrome. Varying levels of ingested nitrate concentration and its possible adverse health impacts on humans and livestock population are presented in Figure 1. These health impacts depend upon the exposure duration and ingested concentration of nitrate. To ascertain possible and specific correlation, there is a need for comprehensive health impact surveys.

Presence of geogenic factors along with the anthropogenic sources makes understanding of sources of nitrate contamination difficult. Many researchers have reported the use of statistical tools, Geographical Information System (GIS) tools and isotopic analysis to identify the source of elevated nitrate levels in groundwater. However, areas having similar geological and hydrological characteristics have shown different levels of contamination, which indicates the presence of complex bio-geochemical factors behind the elevated nitrate levels. Moreover, the geogenic factors behind these elevated levels are somewhat neglected in earlier studies, hence an attempt is made in this paper to discuss the various sources and leaching mechanism behind the nitrate contamination. Comparisons are also made between the methodologies available for source identification/differentiation. A comprehensive management framework is also proposed to be incorporated in further studies, which would not only help in understanding the origin, release mechanism and the complex dynamics behind the fate of nitrate in the groundwater, but also be vital for managing the associated health risks and safeguarding the affected water supplies.

Sources of nitrate in various ecosystems

The formation of nitrate is an integral part of the nitrogen cycle in our environment and it may reach the groundwater through either anthropogenic sources or geogenic sources. Globally, about 260 million tonnes of atmospheric nitrogen is fixed annually into the soil through
biological and non-biological processes. Biological fixation accounts for 193 million tonnes of nitrogen per year (67.25%), through land (legume and non-legume) and sea (Figure 2). The remaining 32.75% is through non-biological processes such as atmospheric lightning and industrial discharges. The nitrogen fixed in the soil is further converted to nitrate and nitrite. Nitrate also form due to the breaking down of fertilizers by microorganisms, decaying plants, manures or other organic residues, which further add nitrate in the soil. Nitrate-containing compounds are generally soluble and easily migrate, heavy rain or irrigation water may subsequently cause leaching of these ions into the groundwater. The rapid increase in nitrate concentration has adverse effects on various ecosystems such as increase in NOx emissions, algal blooms and subsequent eutrophication, etc. The varying nitrogen accumulation potential (ability to retain the nitrogen within the respective ecosystem) and transfer potential (ability of the respective ecosystem to allow the migration of nitrogen into another ecosystem) is a good indicator of the risk of nitrate and nitrite contamination in these ecosystems. The comparison of this accumulation and transfer potential for various ecosystems is shown in Figure 4. It is evident here that, although atmosphere and agro-systems have low accumulation potential, the high transfer potential presents a risk of contamination in other ecosystems especially transferring into the groundwater. Similarly, high accumulation and high transfer potential of grasslands and forests present the risk of nitrate contamination in groundwater through anthropogenic interventions.

Anthropogenic sources

Various anthropogenic activities such as heavy fertilizer application, improper disposal of industrial waste, deforestation, poor construction of septic tanks and leaching pits, are mostly responsible for high values of nitrate infiltrating the groundwater regime (Figure 3). Among these, fertilizer application and subsequent leaching is considered the primary reason for nitrate contamination of shallow aquifers (Figure 5). Nitrogen is one of the major components of all inorganic fertilizers, usage of which has increased to achieve better crop yield. Over application and improper timing of applying the fertilizers may cause nitrate to leach into the groundwater. Vinod et al. reported nitrate concentration of up to 75 mg/l leaching from the irrigated lands in Karnataka, India. Similarly, Gheysari et al. reported a NO3-N concentration in the range of 46–138 mg/l. Intensive livestock farming and waste from cattle also cause nitrate contamination of groundwater.

Leakage from sewers and septic tanks affects the underlying aquifers in majority of urban agglomerations around the world. The wastewater percolation to the aquifers can amount up to 100 million litres annually.
Nearly one-third of the population is connected with on-site sewage disposal (septic tanks, pit latrines) in the United States, Canada, Australia, Florida and many developing countries\(^\text{14,30}\). Various numerical and GIS-based models (TOUGHREACT-N, ArcNLET, MANAGE, TNT2, etc.) have been developed to stimulate the fate of nitrate through these on-site disposal systems. These models primarily rely on analytical equations describing the transport of nitrate in the groundwater and consider advection, hydrodynamic dispersion and denitrification processes for stimulation\(^\text{30,31}\). The results of these models suggest a nitrate load of up to 2.5 kg/day from the septic tanks\(^\text{30}\) which leaches down to the aquifer. Other studies have reported an average nitrogen load of up to 25–60 mg/l, and 60% of this nitrogen is assumed to be converted to nitrate which reaches the aquifer system\(^\text{18,30}\).

Various nitrogen-containing compounds such as (i) anhydrous ammonia, (ii) nitric acid, (iii) urea, etc. are extensively used in textile industry, dye manufacturing and metal processing industries. Mismanagement and improper disposal of the wastes from these industries may also add to nitrate contamination in groundwater\(^\text{12,33}\). Nitrogen
is also a major constituent in the manufacturing of explosives, utilizing the ammonium nitrate, inadequate waste handling and affected disposal streams from these industries may add the nitrate into the aquifer systems.

Apparently, these anthropogenic factors contribute substantially in the places of high rate of fertilizer application, ample rainfall, light textured soil and shallow water table, towards elevated nitrate concentrations in groundwater. Contaminated landfills, urban fertilizer use (in-house gardening, recreational grasslands, etc.), and construction of buildings also contribute to the on-ground nitrate loading in small quantities.

Geogenic sources

Ammonification, nitrification and denitrification are the governing natural processes behind the nitrate formation in soil. The gaseous nitrogen from the atmosphere is fixed and added to the soil as ammonia through lightning storms, and bacteria present in soil and root nodules of plants. Moreover, the nitrogen from volcanic eruptions is also added to soil through precipitation. Similarly, the wastes from animals, dead remains of plants and animals also undergo ammonification in the soil. This ammonia undergoes nitrification/ammonia oxidation (action of nitrifying bacteria such as nitrosomonas and nitrobacter) to form nitrate. The excess nitrogen and nitrate may reach the surface water bodies and cause eutrophication. This nitrate also leaches down to the aquifer systems and contaminates the groundwater. However, the nitrate contribution from these natural processes is small, and very difficult to estimate, as the nitrate may undergo denitrification (action of denitrifying bacteria such as Pseudomonas) and gets converted to nitrogen gas. Moreover, the nitrate may also be assimilated by plants for their nutritional requirement (Figure 3). The extent of assimilation and denitrification primarily governs the background nitrate concentration in the aquifer systems.

Further, there are several minerals in aquifer strata (tobelite, nitre, nitratine, etc.), having nitrogen in their lattice, which undergo the process of weathering and creates probability of releasing the nitrogen from their lattice. This nitrogen may further be converted to nitrate and subsequently contaminate the groundwater. Gupta et al. found high nitrate concentrations in the ‘river bank filtration well’ as well as in the groundwater samples from several zones of Srinagar and Srikot area. Water in the affected sites was exposed to zones of phyllites and quartzite bedrocks in the region, and the isotopic composition of nitrate in water samples and leachates obtained from the bedrocks were found similar, indicating that nitrate is originating in the groundwater through weathering and subsequent leaching from these bedrocks. Power et al. found that approximately 200 kg/ha of ammonium existed in a 1 m thickness of the Paleocene Fort Union Shale in North Dakota and eastern Montana, which was found to be rapidly nitrified to nitrate under favourable moisture, temperature and oxygen concentration.

Several other factors like, nature and thickness of surface deposits, rainfall quantity and distribution, depth to the groundwater level, distribution of vegetation types and presence of nitrogen-fixing vegetation, all contribute towards the elevated levels of nitrate in the groundwater.

It is well established that contribution of geogenic sources of nitrate in groundwater is smaller when compared with anthropogenic sources, but its importance cannot be ignored in a comprehensive study. Hence, detailed studies incorporating the assessment of geogenic sources must also be conducted to identify the precise source and release mechanism of nitrate in groundwater. Furthermore, based on the studies cited here, Table 1 presents the origin of nitrate in groundwater and possible range of nitrate concentration from the respective source.

Proposed comprehensive framework for source identification

Nitrate contamination in groundwater primarily is a function of on-ground nitrogen loading. However, the source identification and/or differentiation is complex and hence, requires a framework to identify the possible source. Almasri has proposed a detailed conceptual management framework; but the framework discusses only the management options in detail and does not specifically deal with source identification. The framework with mathematical modelling, wherein great attention is required for data collection (both qualitatively and quantitatively), is time consuming, requires skilled manpower, which might not be feasible in all the studies. Time constraint is also important, as many of these areas will already be looking for alternate water supply options. Variability of data
Table 1. Concentration of nitrate in groundwater from various sources

| Origin of nitrate                      | Concentration range | Remarks                                                                |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Background level\(^a\)                | < 5–10 mg/l         | Samples collected from wells in forest areas                           |
| Agricultural practices\(^b,25–28,56\) | 5–800 mg/l          | Very highly variable                                                    |
| Septic tanks/leaching pits\(^29,30,57–59\) | Not detected – 300 mg/l | Moderately variable. Sometimes values up to as high as 500 mg/l were also reported\(^a\) |
| Leaky sewers\(^14,29,30\)             | 10–50 mg/l          | Variable                                                                |
| Deforestation\(^b,60,61\)             | 3–15 mg/l           | Depending upon soil depth                                               |
|                                      | 150–400 mg/l        | Only for brief periods after rain                                       |
| Contaminated land\(^b,62\)            | 10–20 mg/l          | –                                                                      |
| Industrial applications\(^34\)        | 20–100 mg/l         | –                                                                      |
|                                      | 250 mg/l/F          |                                                                         |
| Mineral weathering\(^b,38,65\)        | 20–250 mg/l         | Highly variable                                                         |

\(^a\)Authors concluded that fissured bedrock may be responsible for such elevated level. \(^b\)Taking nitrification and denitrification into account. \(^c\)Leaching from open-pit mines.

collection and the effect of nitrate contamination also hampers the progress with the proposed management framework. Therefore, there is a need to develop a holistic framework to identify the source, which could add-on to the management framework proposed by Almasri\(^40\). This holistic approach makes use of the available methodologies to arrive at a conclusion regarding the source of nitrate in groundwater. Certain aspects of this framework are discussed in detail in the following sections.

**Background data collection**

Background data collection is an important and established step before starting a detailed study. This data need to be collected from local government authorities, study reports, research articles and reports from other relevant departments. Moreover, a reconnaissance survey of the identified affected areas should also be done, which will help in better understanding of the topography and presence of rivers, drains, waste dumping sites, connectivity to sewer, sanitation practices, water level in dug wells, and various anthropogenic activities close to the adversely affected areas. The survey must also study for any possible health impacts due to nitrate contamination in the affected area. Furthermore, representative samples must be collected to look for the status of nitrate contamination in the study area\(^40\). These representative samples will help in identifying the spatial pattern of nitrate contamination and will feed as primary data to map the extent of the affected area.

**Analytical studies**

Once the nitrate contamination is established, it becomes important to monitor the water quality over all the seasons; this would not only re-confirm the status of contamination, but also help in ruling out some factors over seasonal behaviour. Further, the holistic approach must include the following methodologies.

**Water quality analysis:** Regular monitoring (seasonal/monthly) of groundwater level and its quality (nitrate, various physico-chemical and bacteriological parameters, viz. pH, cations, anions, heavy metals, etc.) must be done. Fluctuation in water level and its correlation with nitrate concentration may indicate the leaching mechanism of nitrate into the aquifer strata and subsequently into the groundwater. The correlations of nitrate with other parameters (Cl\(^–\), K\(^+\), SO\(_4^{2–}\)) will help in understanding its origin as well\(^23\) (Table 2).

**Thematic mapping:** The various thematic maps like, digital elevation model, water quality parameters, water table, topography, land uses, availability of cropland, fertilizer application, etc. must be prepared for the study area\(^41\). These maps and overlay of multiple datasets will help in understanding and confirming the spatial occurrence of nitrate and identifying the nitrate hotspots in the study area\(^42\).

**Collection and analysis of sediments:** Monitoring wells must be constructed at the sites affected by elevated nitrate concentration, and during the construction of these wells, vertical sediment samples must be collected at regular depth (say every 3–5 m). Further, clay, silt and sand fraction of these sediment samples must be separated and quantified through grain size analysis to understand the lithology of the affected site. The collected sediment sample should be further analysed through X-ray diffraction (XRD) for identification of any mineral bearing nitrate or other form of nitrogen in its lattice.

Furthermore, the findings from XRD should be correlated through X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis. XRF study would confirm the presence of various major and trace elements in the sediment samples. Chemical
index of alteration (CIA) must also be calculated for the representative sediments. CIA values integrated with XRF data help in preparing the A–K–CN diagram which suggest the intensity of mineral weathering and ionic mobility in soil profile. These results will further help in understanding the leaching mechanism of nitrate into the groundwater\textsuperscript{41,44}.

\textbf{Fertilizer loading calculations:} The fertilizer-loading rate must be correlated with the nitrate concentration in both the nitrate affected and non-affected areas. This will narrow down the possibility of nitrate leaching from fertilizers. Furthermore, the fertilizer application rate modelling through GIS, fuzzy logic and other numerical methods will help in better fertilizer management\textsuperscript{45}.

\textbf{Design of septic tanks:} Studies have shown that nitrate can contaminate the groundwater through leakage from septic tanks. Inspection for any possible leakage from septic tanks, sewer pipes, pit latrines must be done, especially in areas with onsite sewage disposal systems\textsuperscript{46}. Mathematical and GIS modelling (as discussed above) must be done to analyse the extent of nitrate leaching.

\textbf{Groundwater modelling:} Groundwater modelling using MODFLOW and other such modelling software helps in management of groundwater and surface water resources\textsuperscript{47}. Determination of groundwater flow and study of the contaminant behaviour in a particular aquifer is important to assess the extent of groundwater pollution in various aquifers. The modelling data will help in analysing the flow direction of groundwater and subsequent management of groundwater resources.

\textbf{Specific source differentiation methods:} Various statistical tools such as PCA, bivariate analysis, Gibb’s diagram, etc. and analytical methods such as isotopic analysis, GIS mapping, are available for source identification of nitrate in groundwater, and are suitable to differentiate between the geogenic and anthropogenic source\textsuperscript{48,49}. Table 2 presents a comparison of some of the most commonly accepted and used methodologies. It can be inferred that isotopic analysis is one of the best methods available for source differentiation and hence, stable isotope abundance of nitrate has frequently been used to identify nitrate origins. However, $\delta^{15}$NNO$\textsubscript{3}$ from different origins shows overlapping ranges\textsuperscript{50,51}. Moreover, it is hard to distinguish between nitrification or denitrification using only $\delta^{15}$NNO$\textsubscript{3}$, because of significant nitrogen fractionation, which happens during these processes\textsuperscript{52}. Hence, additional measurement of $\delta^{18}$O\textsubscript{NO$\textsubscript{3}$} is required to

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\textbf{Method} & \textbf{Short description} & \textbf{Use as nitrate source identification} \\
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Statistical analysis & Bivariate analysis$^{64-66}$ & Useful in analysing the alkaline/non-alkaline influence. Also indicates the possibility of mineral weathering. \\
& Gibb’s plot$^{11,49,67}$ & Useful to decide the controlling factor pertaining to ion chemistry in groundwater. Can indicate the presence of rock weathering. \\
Principal component analysis (PCA), factor analysis, cluster analysis$^{49,70,71}$ & Interpretation of water level measurements in both space and time. Variation reduction procedure where various parameters are reduced to counterfeit called principals (PC). PCs having eigenvalues greater than 1 are generally taken into consideration. \\
Isotopic analysis$^{13,50-53}$ & Environmental isotopes such as carbon, nitrogen and oxygen represent one of the most useful tools available in geochemistry to study groundwater quality. It can also be used to assess the geochemical evolution, rock–water interaction, and most importantly, the source of pollution. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Commonly used methods to differentiate between geogenic and anthropogenic sources of nitrate in groundwater}
\end{table}
obtain much more precise information about the origin of nitrate\textsuperscript{53}, especially in areas where nitrogenous fertilizers are used extensively\textsuperscript{52}. Moreover, when the datasets have varying nitrate levels, integration of two or more methods becomes much more informative. Simultaneous application of correlation matrix with PCA proves to be useful in examining the variance in any large dataset, as PCA reduces the dimensionality of variables\textsuperscript{54}. Similarly, the spatial and seasonal variations in the contributions of dominant nitrate sources can be easily recognized through integration of groundwater hydrochemistry and nitrate isotopic composition\textsuperscript{55}. The availability of resources also plays an important role in deciding the methodology to be adopted for source differentiation. As, isotopic analysis is expensive and is not available in all the countries, it becomes prudent to go for other statistical approaches. Moreover, certain restrictions pertaining to isotopic characteristics can also be overcome when statistical approaches are combined with major cations and anions\textsuperscript{55}. A summary of these approaches towards preparing a holistic framework is shown in Figure 6. The comprehensive study suggested in this framework shall be carried out on case-to-case basis to analyse the sources and leaching mechanisms of elevated levels of nitrate in the groundwater of the affected areas.

**Conclusion**

Nitrate is one of the major contaminants of drinking water in most of the areas around the world. Occurrence of elevated nitrate concentration in groundwater is governed by various complex biogeochemical processes, which makes the assessment of source a complex exercise. Many researchers incorporated the use of statistical tools and isotopic analysis to differentiate between the anthropogenic and geogenic sources of nitrate contamination in groundwater. However, there are certain limitations to these methods and a more comprehensive methodology needs to be incorporated while studying the source of leaching and mechanism. Moreover, the importance of geogenic factors and detailed studies for the same is somewhat neglected. Isotopic studies may prove better in
deciphering the origin of nitrate in groundwater, but statistical tools will fare better in understanding the leaching mechanism. Hence, the proposed framework and differentiation methods shall be adopted on case-to-case basis and special emphasis shall be given towards the possible contribution of geogenic factors behind the elevated nitrate levels. This holistic approach would also act as a road map towards developing the technology in obtaining the nitrate-free drinking water.

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