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Water spotted in 2 days: Nair

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Sept. 25: India's mooncraft Chandrayaan-I spotted water within two days of flying around the moon when the flag-bearer — Moon Impact Probe — journeyed down to land on the earth's nearest astral neighbour, says G. Madhavan Nair, chairman of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

The 30-kg MIP, one of the 11 instruments on board, picked up the first signature of water during its 25 minute descent to lunar soil on November 14, 2008. At that point, however, scientists mistook it for contamination and did not pursue the issue, Mr Nair said at a press conference where Isro formally confirmed the path-breaking discovery by NASA's Moon Mineralogy Mapper (M3) instrument, on Friday.

"It has shattered the original belief that moon is bone-dry. It will change the way we look at the moon and future planetary exploration," Mr Nair said.

He said the Nasa instrument beamed home information about water in the lunar soil first in February 2009, and repeated it in March and June 2009. "The quantity found is much larger than expected, but it is not in the form of a sea or lake or drops. It is embedded on the surface in minerals and rocks. We can extract water. But one tonne of soil may yield half a litre (water)," he said.

While the presence of water would enhance the number of lunar missions, it would also increase the possibility of a human colony by 2030. "It (water) can support life (on the moon) and provide fuel for rockets for missions planned beyond (the moon)," Mr Nair said.

Isro and other international teams that put together 11 instruments on board the orbiter are confident of several interesting breakthroughs based on information garnered by the mooncraft. "This is one of the major events of Chandrayaan-I. It will take some more time to analyze the data. So, may be over the six months to two years, we can expect a lot of discoveries," Dr J.N. Goswami, principal scientist, Chandrayaan-I, said.