

Neera, palm tree juice that could go Amul way

A special filtration technique to enhance the shelf life of Neera, a sweet juice tapped from the palm tree, could help make it available to people all over the country.

The technique, which ensures better distillation of the juice, is dedicated to Gujarat's Neera and Talpadarth Gramodyog Sangh at Kalgam in Valsad district.

Sanjay Nene, a scientist at the Pune-based National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) who was involved in the development of the technique, told IANS over phone that it had the potential to do 'a smaller version of what Amul did for milk'.

Amul through cooperative milk societies helped usher in what is known as the 'white revolution' in India.

Nene said once the shelf life increased and Neera was 'properly stored and packed', the drink could be transported for longer distances. Neera, whose consumption now is extremely localised, could become a nutritious drink offering a healthy alternative to aerated beverages.

The loss by way of excess time and deterioration, which is now around 12 percent, could be reduced to about five percent resulting in better revenue for tappers.

Initially, the technique will increase the shelf life of the drink to about 10 days and later to 30 days. Properly refrigerated and packed, Neera can now be transported over a distance of 500 km.

'This means the availability of Neera as a good drink across the country. It will be another success story in rural development,' said Nene.

Nene also said there are an estimated 150 million palm trees in different parts of the country.

The central government is trying to develop Neera clusters under the Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI).

The Gramodyog Sangh, which undertakes programmes to help those who tap the palm trees, has under its fold 50 cooperative societies or institutions. The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) implements the scheme.

Apart from increasing the availability of the drink, the Neera cluster aims at generating more employment for tappers.

According to a KVIC press release, at the end of the cluster programme after five years, the number of people employed as tappers is estimated to be around 1,650 as against the current number of 500. The wages to tappers are also expected to rise by 30 to 40 percent.

At present, tappers collect Neera in the wee hours of the morning, as it is sensitive to changing weather conditions and perishes rapidly, making it impossible to transport it over long distances.

The tapped Neera is then sent to outlets at Surat, Bharuch, Bardoli, Vyara, Hazira, Valsad, Vansda

and Vapi by the Sangh's societies.

By adopting the special filtration technique, the quality and hygienic condition of Neera is being improved, according to KVIC.

The extension will also benefit as it is estimated that 20 percent more Neera could be collected leading to an increase in the income for both tappers and farmers.

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