

MARKETING AND PROCESSING OF ARECANUT IN ASSAM AN OVERVIEW

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The arecanut palm, *Areca catechu* L., is the source of common masticatory nut, popularly known as arecanut, betel nut or *supari* or *tamol* in Assam. It is extensively used in India by all sectors of people as a masticatory and is an essential requisite for several religious and social ceremonies. Consequently, the arecanut palm occupies a prominent place among the cultivated crops in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Assam, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal and is of considerable economic and socio-religious importance for the entire country. In India, it occupies an area of 3.81 lakh hectares with an annual production of 4.83 lakh tonnes. The practice of chewing arecanut, either alone or in combination with betel leaves, lime, tobacco, camphor or spices, the combination then being called *tambula* has been in existence from time immemorial. Chewing is said to increase the production of saliva and gastric juices and thus, aids in digestion. Assam is one of the different states, where arecanut is being

cultivated as a commercial crop. Though arecanut cultivation is confined within the homestead gardens in Assam, it is also extensively cultivated as an important commercial crop. In Assam, arecanut occupies an area of 74,100 hectares with a production of 70,400 tonnes. It caters to the needs of almost the entire North-East which included seven states. Apart from the released varieties like Mangala and Mohitnagar, the local selections namely Kahikuchi Local and other local accessions performed better and even in some cases produced more yield than the released varieties. The people of the state have a habit of taking arecanut (locally called '*tamol*') along with betel vine (locally called '*pan*'). Almost 90 per cent of the population in Assam and adjoining states like Meghalaya, from young age to old has the habit of chewing *tamol* and *pan*. The people mostly prefer the ripe arecanut and the demand for processed arecanut is comparatively low. Assam figures a special position in the map of India as far as arecanut area and

production is concerned. The area and production of arecanut in Assam and neighbouring states are detailed in table 1.

Table 1: Area and Production of Arecanut (2003-04)

Assam		Meghalaya		Mizoram (2001-02)		Tripura (2001-02)	
Area	Production	Area	Production	Area	Production	Area	Production
74.1	70.4	11.2	14.2	1.3	5.6	3.4	6.9

Area ('000 hac), Production('000 tonnes)

Source : Economic Intelligence Service, Agriculture, April 2007, CMIE.

Out of the many features in every perishable horticultural product, marketing plays an important role and arecanut is not an exception. The fully ripe arecanut fruit can not be expected to remain in the market for a period of more than 5-6 days keeping in view the stresses it suffers during handling and transportation. In Assam, arecanut fruits come to ripening stage during December-May depending upon the physiographic characteristics of the region. Generally harvesting operation is being done in the month of December-January in the Barak valley region and April-May in the Brahmaputra valley region in Assam. Weekly / bi-weekly markets (locally called *hat*) at different areas/localities are the first and primary marketing places for the producers and buyers. Purchasing and selling of the nuts as a whole in the farmers' garden itself 2-3 months well in advance of maturity stage by the middlemen is a very commonly

observed marketing practice followed by poor marginal farmers or producers in the villages of Assam. Guwahati, the gate way of the seven North-Eastern states is the main arecanut whole sale marketing place for the entire region.

During December 15th to March last week, when the arecanut fruits are in immature stage in lower Assam, the markets are flooded with ripe fruits collected from south Assam and adjoining states. The places of collection include areas like Silchar, Badarpur, Hailakandi, Cachar etc. The distance from Guwahati to the above places varies from 200-500 kms.

In Guwahati, the marketing channel consists of four prominent phases. The first phase is the producer which refers to all the small, marginal and large scale farmers. In villages of Assam, it is commonly observed that each and every household is having a homestead garden dominated by arecanut palm. Every homestead has at least 50-300 arecanut palms and strangely, very few large plantations are seen. Second, the collector of the produce, the persons that are

employed for collection of the ripe/semi-ripe nuts directly from the producers and for a particular bulk of arecanut this phase lasts for 1-2 days. Third, the Commission Agent, who is employed from the wholesaler side. The main purpose of this commission agent is to supply the ripe nuts on the same day to the wholesalers specifically at Guwahati, Dhubri, Silchar, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Boko, Rangia, Nalbari, Howly, Dhing Bijay Nagar, Hojai etc. Here, the commission agents are paid an amount of Rs.70 per each bag of areca fruit. Interestingly, the commission for the agents has no connection with the increasing or decreasing demand in the market. The areca fruits are sold in the market in form of 'paun' unit and one 'paun' consists of 80 numbers of nuts. On an average on bag (locally called 'bosta') of areca ripe fruit contains 22-27 *pauns* of fruit depending upon the size of the fruit. Then the Fourth, the wholesalers, who first procure the ripe nuts through the commission agents and sell the produce directly in the market and in rare cases they provide the produce to retailers. This stage i.e., from the wholesaler to the end of the sale day lasts for 3-4 days. In no case, it goes beyond 4 days due to the perishable nature of the produce. In some cases, it is being observed that the wholesalers and retailers do not want to store their produce for more than two days and even if the demand in the market

is poor they sell their produce. In Assam, arecanut prices are more fluctuating in nature. During the period between December-March, the price for one *paun* of ripe fruit ranges from Rs.37-52 and during April-June/July, it comes down to Rs.22-32 per *paun*. The main cause of this is that in parts of lower Assam, harvesting of ripe fruits starts in April and the availability of huge quantity of produce in the market makes the distress sale. Sometimes during January-March, the wholesalers procure the produce from neighbouring states like Meghalaya and parts of Meghalaya like Garo hills, Tura hills and Uliamnagar etc. According to the wholesalers and the consumers, the nuts procured from Meghalaya are comparatively bigger in size and better in quality. The extra benefit the wholesaler experiences is that transportation cost is comparatively less as compared to the import of produce from Upper Assam.

Processing of Arecanut

Like other horticultural crops, arecanut fruit is also perishable in nature which needs processing, value addition etc., to avoid distress sale and to fetch remunerative price in the market. A few of the major indigenous arecanut fruit processing practices/methods followed by the farmers and businessmen of Assam have been described below :

Sun Dried Splitted Arecanut (*Fala Supari*)

It is a method of processing arecanut followed in Assam by farmers and middle level business men to fetch remunerative price in the market. In this method, during harvesting period well matured nuts are split into two equal parts and sun dried for 3-5 days under open environment. Then these dried split nuts are easily dehusked with a sharp knife and kept under sun shine for another 5-7 days for further drying to avoid the damages, if any, during the storage period. Then these well dried nuts are packed in gunny bags and kept for 3-4 months to fetch a good price during off season. On an average 1 kg of *fala supari* can be produced from 100 Nos. of nuts and it fetches Rs.60-80 depending on the market price.

Ceiling Dried Round Arecanut (*Gota Supari*)

It is one of the methods of processing arecanut practised by farmers and businessmen. Here, well matured nuts are kept on the ceiling uniformly for drying purposes for 2-3 months. Sometimes it is also observed in the villages that arecanut garlands are prepared stitching the husks of arecanut and placed in the upper side of the house near the ceiling for uniform drying under shaded condition. After 2-3 months of shade drying, nuts are dehusked without splitting. Then these dehusked nuts are packed in gunny bags and sold

in the market and it fetches more prices as compared to split sun dried arecanut. On a vaerage 1 kg of *gota supari* can be produced from 80 Nos. of nuts and it fetches Rs.80-100 depending on the season and market price.

Pit Stored Arecanut (*Burah Tamol*)

Another form of processed arecanut is called *Burah tamol / Gaddha supari* and in this type of storage ripe arecanuts during April-June are stored deep in pits. Normally, during this peak period of harvest the price of ripe arecanut goes below Rs.15 per *paun*. Therefore, to avoid any distress sale, normally the small and marginal farmers store the nuts in a pit of about 1-1.5m depth in the soil. The bottom and side of the pit is covered by arecanut or banana leaves. Then fully matured ripe nuts are put batch wise in the pit. Now this batch of nut is well mixed with cow dung. This way all the batches of nuts are mixed with cow dung and the pit is closed by a layer of leaves and sand and kept for 3-4 months. During August-October/November, when there is a shortage of nuts in the market this type of stored nuts are brought for sale. Normally, this type of processed muts produce a disagreeable odour, may be because of type of storage (fermented one). Otherwise, the nuts remain in a good condition and the price is also very encouraging.

Water deep Arecanut (*Burah Tamol*)

It is almost the same method of arecanut processing as the Pit Stored Arecanut (*Burah Tamol*). Here freshly harvested matured nuts are packed in a gunny bag and kept in deep water such as pond, fishery etc., for a period of 3-4 months. Then in off season, after 3-4 months bages are taken out and nuts are dried in the bag itself and taken to the market which fetches a good price.

Boiled arecanut (*Chikni Tamol*)

Locally areca nuts after this type of processing are termed as '*Chikni Tamol*'. During January-February, when the nuts are of 6½ -7½ months old (locally called *jal supari* or *kachha supari*), the processor collects the nuts from different places (individual plantation) at the prevailing market price i.e at the range of Rs.15-20 per *paun*. Then the collected nuts are boiled in a large *pan* (called *handi/handa*) in a manner in which at a time all the nuts are fully dipped in the boiled water. The water in the *pan* is fully boiled upto a temperature of 90-100°C. The nuts are boiled for about one hour and after that another batch of nuts

are ready for boiling. This process continues till the end. Sometimes the water level in the *pan* decreases and extra water is added to the remaining water to occupy the whole batch of nuts at one time. After boiling, the nuts are dehusked without giving any injury to the kernel. The fully dehusked nuts are then dried under sun for 10-12 days until a dark red colour of the kernels is obtained. Then they are ready for sale. The prices of this type of processed nuts vary from Rs.80-90 per kg. On an average 3-4 *pauns* of arecanut is required to get 1 kg of processed nut. This type of processed nuts can be stored for a period of 2-3 months without any risk.

Conclusion

Even though, it is one of the most important cash crops in this part of the country, lack of proper regulatory markets has deprived the producers of the much-needed income for their produce. So, proper functioning of the existing regulatory markets including the farmers' awareness on scientific cultivation practices will, no doubt, improve the economy of the region and the farmer, specifically.
