



# Neera

## A Tasty & Healthy Boon to Coconut Farmers

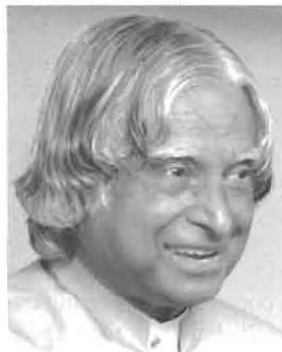
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Ten years ago on July 28, 2005, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam — who was then the president — presented a vision document for Kerala's development in the state assembly by giving thrust to coconut value-added products and Neera, tourism, waterways, Ayurveda, deep sea fishing, major special economic zones, IT sector among others to channel development. The state has excelled in tourism and average performance in the case of IT, fishing and other sectors. But, Chief Minister Shri. Oommen Chandy pointed out that the state had progressed in the right direction with Neera, which is just a perfect example. It had changed the life of coconut farmers and created many job opportunities.

The ever increasing number of neera parlors and the skyrocketing sales of the health drink, speaks volumes about the importance Neera is gaining in the hearts of people. There is visibly no other product that has come this long as far as health benefits and taste is concerned. Undoubtedly we can say that Neera is revolutionizing the drinking habit of people across the world.

### Market Watch

The Coconut Producer's Companies which are engaged in the production and marketing of Neera should focus more on bringing out quality products according to the market demand. The value of the product can



be understood from the words of Shri. Oommen Chandy, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Kerala, who has termed Neera project as his dream project. The aim of the companies and the farmer collectives should be to bring this product into the domestic and international markets and maintain a steady growth. Mr. K. M. Chandrasekhar, Vice Chairman, Planning Board, Kerala, has said that if one percent of the total 18 crores of coconut trees in Kerala is used for tapping Neera, the state

would get around Rs. 5400 crore worth extra income. Of the Rs. 5400 crore, farmers would be getting around Rs. 2700 crore, Neera technicians would get Rs. 1350 crore and the government tax would be around Rs. 405 crore. But, reality is a bit more different here. The actual statistics points out that the income the farmers, companies and the technicians are getting is way too high than the projected ones. Apart from this, the Government of Kerala has recently issued an order giving instructions to the local self government institutes to support Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) for marketing Neera and its value-added products through Panchayaths, Municipal Corporations, Municipalities etc.

By participating in the domestic, national and international exhibitions, Board is spreading great awareness among people about the goodness of Neera and its value-added products and also giving opportunity



for the producer companies to introduce their products to the probable clients by participating in exhibitions. In almost all the exhibitions, Board is getting ample footfall for tasting Neera. Other value added products such as Neera Honey, Jaggery, Neera Sugar, Neera Chocolate, etc also getting good number of trade enquiries from around the world. Neera Sugar is a natural product with no chemical process involved in its production and is emerging as an attraction in European markets. There is growing demand in the developed countries for coconut sugar as an alternative to refined cane sugar.

The companies have to keep this factor in mind and work towards making this product an internationally acceptable one. The companies has to give more importance to trade mark, packaging, labeling, marketing, quality and availability of the products before venturing into the market. A product which has all these elements in it will sure be able to conquer the minds of people and would be able to find its own place in the market. International buyers from America, Canada, France, Germany and Middle East are all set with their markets open to welcome the product. All we have to do is rise up to the expectations and make hay while the sun shines.

### Healthy All the Way!

We have been witnessing a drastic change in the lifestyle of people across the world. People were

largely interested in soft drinks and health drinks available in the market, which are extremely harmful for health. Reports have been coming out that per year around 184000 people are losing their lives because of the so-called synthetic soft drinks. Realizing this, many people are now coming towards a more natural and healthy option. The ready-to-drink Neera is one of the most natural and nutrient-rich health drinks available in the market. Drinking Neera is good for keeping the body hydrated and its powerful antioxidants will help you feel refreshed and full of energy. It also regulates body's fluid balance, control temperature and digest food. Keeping in mind these factors, the Board has promoted the ever natural and healthy Neera as a viable option.

Neera can be concentrated to different brix (value of total solids) level at different temperatures to produce primary products like Neera sugar, Neera jaggery, Neera semi solid jaggery, jaggery syrup, Neera honey and Neera concentrate. Another advantage is that working moms and cookaholics get a great choice for substituting normal cane sugar, with natural and healthy Neera sugar/jaggery/syrup/honey in almost all the dishes and make wonderful, energizing and healthy foods for your loved ones. Neera sugar is an unrefined sugar and is known to be rich in vitamins and minerals. Consumption of Neera sugar helps reduce & maintain weight, control &



manage diabetes and is naturally rich in a number of key vitamins (A, B & C), minerals and phytonutrients, including potassium, phosphorous, zinc, iron and vitamins B1, B2, B3 and B6. Neera drink can be given to school children as a nutritious health drink. Neera chocolates would also be a hit among school children.

### Opportunities Galore

The job opportunity this creates is also a commendable one. There is an urgent requirement of 25000 Neera tappers in Kerala. Extracting Neera requires a technically skilled person to perform activities such as climbing tree, skillfully stimulating the inflorescence, application

of disinfectant, wrapping the inflorescence etc in a hygienic manner. So to venture into the production of Neera and its value added products there is an immediate need to create a task force of 'Neera technicians'. Coconut Development Board has taken the initiative of developing a pool of skilled Neera technicians. This training is of a period of 56 days. It is open for anyone from any profession or unemployed youth belonging to the age group of 18-45 years. Average monthly income of a neera technician is approx Rs. 20000/-. Till now Board has imparted training to 1559 neera technicians through CPCs. Government of Kerala has allocated Rs. 12 crores for neera technicians training and would incur Rs. 10000 per person for the training.

There are Neera technicians in Kaipuzha Coconut Producer Company Ltd., who have drawn nearly half a lakh as their monthly remuneration. The situation is same in other producer companies also. KCPCL had given training to people from Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Jharkhand and Lakshadweep for these green collar jobs and utilizing their services for the company. If one per cent of Neera is tapped in Kerala, it would create around one lakh job opportunities. The traditional toddy tappers get ample number of opportunities in this field. Around 345 toddy tappers, who have been given 15 days of training by Coconut Development Board; have been appointed as Master Technicians so far. The Neera project not only gives opportunity to the technicians or the climbers but also creates lot of scope in value-addition too. Neera can be used in bakery products, sweets, confectionaries etc. There are ample opportunities in the food processing sector also. CDB is imparting training for those who are interested in this field. The producer companies, which are already formed and those who are on the pipeline also needs highly qualified management



*Trained Neera technicians of Karappuram CPC, Alappuzha*

professionals and different levels of qualified personnel for smooth functioning of the company.

Scarcity of trained Neera technicians is posing a tough challenge to the sector. The need of the hour is finding skilled neera technicians and the timely intervention of the coconut producer's companies to enhance the production of Neera as per the market demand. The Palakkad Coconut Producer's Company Ltd (PCPCL), which is the conglomeration of coconut producer's federations (CPFs) in Palakkad, the southern district of Kerala, and Kaipuzha Coconut Producer's Company Ltd (KCPCL), the conglomeration of CPFs in Kollam, the southern district of Kerala, are marching ahead with the Neera project. PCPCL is due to sign an agreement with Mumbai-based Foursome Partners in the second week of August 2015. The Palakkad Company operates about 28 neera parlours through coconut points across the state and sells unprocessed, fresh Neera through vending machines whereas KCPCL markets bottled Neera through kiosks in the main cities.

### **The Pan-India Status**

Recently, in July 2015, Karnataka legislators were served with Neera and its value-added products like sugar and jaggery during the second phase of the legislature session in Bengaluru, Karnataka. The two-fold objective

of the same was to draw attention to the economic importance of this health drink and to persuade them to amend the Karnataka Excise Act to permit all coconut farmers in the state to tap Neera. The State government permits to tap Neera only in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. But, if Neera is to be tapped in all districts, the Excise Act would have to be amended. In his 2015-16 budget speech, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the Act would be amended to permit members of the coconut growers' federations to harvest Neera in limited quantities from coconut trees. Though it would help in increasing the income of coconut growers, the amendment is yet to come through. Senior most officers from Horticulture and Excise Department, Govt. of Karnataka, visited CDB Headquarters recently to study issues related to production, processing and marketing of Neera.

People from the coastal belt of the country have been using Neera and its by-products for a long time. In West Bengal and Orissa most of the Neera is converted into palmgur (jaggery). In Gujarat and Maharashtra too coconut farmers produce palmgur. In Tamil Nadu, the coconut growers have been producing palmgur, palm sugar and palm candy besides selling Neera as Padhaneer whereas in Andhra Pradesh, a section of the population have been selling Neera. ■