

# Despite Mani's promise, neera business remains untapped

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**KOCHI:** Despite Finance Minister K. M. Mani's bold announcement in Friday's Budget that the State government was finally ready to launch what is potentially a Rs. 10,000 crore annual neera tapping business, it still remains a contentious issue and people have already gathered on both sides of the divide.

Minister for Excise and Ports K. Babu told *The Hindu* immediately after the Budget announcement that the issue was still open to debate. Even though the Budget has announced that the government is ready to launch the business, it remains debatable. A decision will be taken only after consultations with all stake-holders, the minister said.

Mr. Babu pointed out that a committee appointed by the government to take a decision on tapping neera, the unfermented sap from coconut flowers, was yet to submit its report. The committee, which was asked to submit the report by March 15, is yet to hold its second sitting.

It is an issue that touches the lives of thousands of people engaged in what is their traditional occupation. A consensus must be arrived at through discussions before a policy



**A CLIMB IN FORTUNE?:** *The issue of neera touches the lives of thousands of people engaged in the traditional occupation.*

change, he added.

## 'Amend Abkari Act'

Despite the Budget announcement a decision has to be taken to amend the Abkari Act, said T. K. Jose, Chairman, Coconut Development Board. "The Abkari Act, which controls production and sale of liquor, wrongly defines toddy as either fermented or unfermented sap from coconut flowers. This historical error has to go from the Act before neera can be

unleashed," he said.

Babu Joseph, the only farmers' representative on the nine-member neera committee, asked why farmers were not being taken into consideration when it comes to tapping neera.

The State secretary of Kerala State Chethuzhohilali Federation D. P. Madhu too opposed changing the State policy without discussions. Tapping neera cannot be left to the farmers, he said.

Mr. Jose said that neera's potential did not lie merely in producing what is a widely accepted health drink.

In fact, the government of Karnataka is selling packed neera even at supermarkets in Kerala.

Palm jaggery distilled from neera is in great demand across the globe. Dr. P. R. Suresh of Kerala Agricultural University, which has developed technology for neera processing, said the pilot production of palm jaggery had excellent results. The product sells for Rs. 600 a kg and there is a big queue of buyers.

The Finance Minister said the neera project was being launched taking forward the bio-parks programme he had announced in his previous Budget presentation. The Budget has set aside Rs. 15 crore for beginning neera tapping and processing in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Malappuram, Palakkad, Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasaragod districts.

The minister said the last meeting on neera tapping was delayed because the head of the committee, the Excise Commissioner, was away in New Delhi on official duty and there was an opinion that the committee should not meet without the Chairman.