

# TN, Karnataka raring to go as Kerala stumbles with Neera

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Kochi: Though the Kerala government has put an end to the long wait of coconut farmers by issuing an order to release Rs 32 crore to expand the production of Neera, neighbouring states are already challenging Kerala's baby steps in selling the non-alcoholic beverage made out of the coconut tree's sap.

The Tamil Nadu Excise Department has issued an order, outlining a project for large-scale production of Neera, while the Karnataka government has earmarked funds for Neera production in the state budget.

Meanwhile in Kerala, the Rs 15 crore allotted for Neera production in the previous budget went unutilised. Though the budgetary allocation was doubled in the current budget, not a single paisa was released for farmers or companies involved in the production of the

drink.

Tamil Nadu leads coconut production in India. Though the state has less land under coconut cultivation than in Kerala, it has achieved far more productivity by nurturing coconut farms the way planters tend to rubber trees in Kerala. Neera production has already started in Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Erode, Madurai and Thanjavur districts.

The Tamil Nadu government is providing subsidies for Neera production. If the farmers start producing the beverage on a plantation to plantation basis, Kerala would find it difficult to match the quantity produced.

Kerala has 20 companies actively producing Neera. They produce only 29,000 litres per week. The Coconut Development Board has set a production target of 1 lakh litres per week and gradually so much per day.

Meeting this production target is necessary for selling Neera elsewhere in India and exporting it to other countries. The state government has to grant production licences to more farmers, give out subsidies to existing farmers and train technicians before it could achieve that ambitious target.

The state government has already budgeted for these purposes but an order to this effect has come out only recently.

Kozhikode leads Kerala's districts in the area of land under coconut cultivation while Malappuram is the largest coconut producer in the state. Kozhikode leads in Neera production too, with seven companies involved in the making of the beverage, while Malappuram has only three companies.

In a national perspective, however, Coimbatore is the largest coconut producer. If Coimbatore manages to match its top position with its fledging Neera production too, Kerala's pioneering efforts in popularising the soft drink would rather go unnoticed.