

COCONUT and its WATER

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Almost everyone who grew up in the city of Bombay—as it was then, before Bal Thackeray changed the name will have his or her own coconut water memory. Mine consists of walking along the seaside at Worli in the evenings and then, as a special treat, being allowed to buy *nariyal paani* from a roadside seller. The ritual was always the same.

The hawker would ask, "*Paani ya malai?*"

This meant: did I want coconut that was full of water or did I want one that had water along with some of the tender flesh?

As I remember it, I always took a minute or two to mull this over in my head before giving exactly the same answer each time: "*malai-wallah.*"

The coconut-seller would lop the head off a green coconut with a curved knife and then offer to put a straw inside the open coconut. I would always refuse, preferring to raise the coconut to my lips and to drink directly from the fruit without the intervention of the straw. Once I had drunk all the water, a process that rarely took more than a minute, I would hand the coconut back to the seller.

He would put a knife into the coconut and scrape off the flesh from its insides. I would push my fingers deep into the coconut and pull out the delicious *malai*. When I was convinced that there was no more *malai* to be excavated, I would look at him accusingly.

"*Upar-walah malai kahan hai?*" I would demand petulantly. The coconut-seller would then produce the top of the coconut that he had lopped off. Sure enough, it would have a layer of *malai*. This would also be scraped off and I would greedily consume it before asking my parents if I could have a second coconut. (For some reason, they always said no.)

As the years went by, I began to note the gentrification of the roadside coconut. If you went to resort hotels in such places as Goa, they welcomed you with an open coconut in its own little basket, draped in a napkin. In these situations, it was not acceptable to throw away the straw, let alone to demand, once you had drunk the water, "*Malai kahan hai?*"

The more I travelled, the more I saw of the coconut. When I first went to Kerala, the coconut capital of India, I was startled to find that often, when you asked for a coconut, a boy would scurry up a tree, cut one from the branch and bring you the freshest coconut you had ever eaten.

Elsewhere in the world, the Thais have turned the cutting of the coconut fruit into a performance spectacle. On the island of Samui, they train monkeys to climb up trees and

pull down coconuts for the benefit of tourists. (Can you imagine how excited I would have been as a little boy in Worli if the local *madaari* had joined forces with the *nariyal paani-wallah* and sent his *bandar* up the tree to find me my coconut?)

By the time I moved to Calcutta and discovered that *daab* or coconut water was a really big deal for Bengalis, I was used to the wonders of the coconut and its water. The Bengalis are well-versed in the coconut milk. This is quite different from coconut water and is not fruit juice at all but something you make from the flesh of the coconut. One of their most famous dishes, cooked in a whole coconut, is *daab chingri* but despite the name, it uses coconut milk, not *daab* as in coconut water.

But they value the water too. Not only do they drink it, they also claim medicinal properties for it. It is a sort of natural Lacto Calamine for Bengalis: they say that it is good for the skin, that it removes chicken pox marks, that it should be applied on hives and that it keeps the complexion smooth. I have no idea if these claims have any medical basis but my guess is that, as with all folk wisdom, there must be something to the belief.

What the Bengalis do not claim is that coconut water is the perfect gym drink. They do not consume it as a sort of energy-giving Red Bull. And their film stars (such as they are) do not long to be photographed drinking *daab*.

And yet, bizarrely, this is precisely how coconut water is beginning to be regarded in the West. According to a recent article in the London *Times*, such celebrities as Madonna, Sienna Miller and Claudia Schiffer drink coconut water all the time as an energy drink. Their fondness for coconut water has led to a boom in the sales of bottled coconut water. This stuff is not cheap. Vita Coco, a brand of bottled coconut water costs \$4.49 per litre or Rs. 340 or so for a single container the size of a mineral water bottle.

So great is the demand for coconut water in the West that the big multinationals are all getting in on the craze. Pepsi Co has bought Brazil's largest coconut water producer. Coca-Cola spent \$15 million on a stake in Zico, a maker of coconut water. And the overpriced Vita Coco is not just drunk by celebrities, it is also increasingly owned by them. Among those who have bought stakes in the company are Matthew McConaughey, Madonna, Demi Moore and the lead singer of the Red Hot Chili Peppers (some mistake surely? shouldn't he be buying a stake in Tabasco?).

So what accounts for the global trendiness of a drink that most Indians take for granted?

The answer has to do with health. It is well-known that coconut water mixes easily with blood. Ever since World War II, army medics have frequently used coconut water for transfusions. Moreover, it is also high in electrolytes which are regarded as essential for the proper functioning of the human body.

But now, new claims are being made for the healthy properties of coconut water. It is said that while most sports drinks (the so-called energy drinks) have electrolytes added artificially, coconut water contains them naturally. The reason energy drinks are consumed during workouts or after is because they reduce the possibility of dehydration (from sweat), replace electrolytes lost during the exercise and enhance the absorption of carbohydrates from the gut. According to coconut water fanatics, energy drinks are synthetic in nature and contain lots of sugar. On the other hand, coconut water has the same beneficial effects (because of its electrolyte content) and has much less sugar than the average energy drink. Moreover, it is ideal for rehydration because it has a water content of 94 per cent. This makes it nature's diet drink. It has virtually no fat and only 46 calories per glass.

Other claims have also been advanced for coconut water but with less medical foundation. Proponents say that regular drinking of coconut water can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart attacks. It is also said that coconut water can help boost metabolism and cause the body to burn calories more quickly than usual.

Other claims have to do with mineral content. The drink has ten times as much potassium as the average sports drink (and double the potassium content of a banana). During times of intense physical activity, potassium is leached from the blood so coconut water serves as a useful source of replacement potassium. This is why celebrity fitness trainers now encourage their movie star clients to drink coconut water after workouts. (Frankly, I'm not sure I understand this. If potassium is so vital during workouts then why don't they just add more of it to energy drinks? It can't be that difficult to do.)

The interesting thing about the coconut water explosion is that even the greatest proponents of the drink make very little of the India connection. In much of the West, coconut water is associated with South America or the West Indies. In the US, a bestselling brand of coconut liqueur is called Malibu after a part of California, not to my mind the centre of coconut-growing world. Even the investments in coconut water companies have been made in South American operations rather than Asian plantations.

This is odd. There is no uniformity of opinion on the origins of the coconut, but many experts believe that the tree first grew in South Asia. Unlike most other fruit and vegetables which are shown to have originated in the Americas, the coconut is one that we can proudly claim for ourselves. The Thai and Indonesian versions seem to have reached there from our shores.

Only Indians understand the coconut. It's part of the Hindu religion. It provides employment to millions in one form or another. It is the symbol of Kerala, India's greenest state. And it is the one fruit that unites both Indian coasts—they drink the water by the Bay of Bengal and on the shores of the Arabian Sea.

It seems to me that we are missing out on a great opportunity. Now that coconut water is an international phenomenon, we should stake our own claim. We should tell the health fanatics what every Bengali knows: don't just drink it, smear it on your skin.

And at the very least, we should teach the world to ask after each gulp of coconut water: "*Lekin malai kahan hai?*"
(From *Hindustan Times*, Sunday magazine)

Honour to Dr. S.K. Gupta

Dr. Salil Kumar Gupta, the noted acarologist of India, who is also well known in the world, has been recently honoured by giving him the "Lifetime Contribution Award—2018" by the Zoological Society, Kolkata, in their 72nd AGM, held at Ballygunge Science College, University of Calcutta.

He had been trying to develop acarology in India for over 50 years, by being author of about 10 books, 260 research publications, and editing 8 seminar proceedings. By all these the acarology in India stands on a strong footing. Besides, he is intimately engaged in teaching of the post graduate classes as well as guiding Ph.D. students, 14 of those have already received their degree. He has travelled extensively in different parts of the world for attending international conferences and as a visiting scientist.

Dr. Gupta earlier served as a Principal Scientist in the ICAR at Bangalore. After superannuating in March 1997, from the high post of 'Scientist F' in the Zoological Survey of India, he has continued to lead his research career with the Medicinal Plants Research & Extension Centre, Ram Krishna Mission, Narendrapur, Kolkata, on acarology projects.