

Camel milk is gaining popularity. Could it be an alternative for dairy market?

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E-paper

Camel milk is in the news. And hailing its virtue is none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Addressing a gathering of farmers in Anand, Gujarat, in October, Modi narrated how he was ridiculed for describing camel milk as nutritious once. It was during his stint as chief minister of Gujarat that he had tried promoting camel milk for its nutritive value and was “scoffed at” by people around him, he revealed.

A decade-and-a-half later, the country is consuming not just camel milk, but even camel milk chocolates and ice-cream. Gulneet, a service manager with a multinational in Gurugram who didn’t want to share her surname, echoes the Prime Minister’s sentiments. “Had it not been for camel milk, my son would have been deprived of dairy for the rest of his life,” she says. Three years ago, her son was diagnosed with lactose intolerance and the pediatrician suggested taking him off cow milk. “There’s so much premium attached to milk in Indian homes. His grandparents were shocked to know that he can’t have milk because of a troublesome gut. They couldn’t believe that a doctor would say that don’t give milk, especially in the formative years, to a child. Those were traumatic days when we were trying to figure out ways to include dairy in his diet,” Gulneet recalls.



The doctor then suggested camel milk for her then four-year-old son. “Initially, we were reluctant. But we researched and read about the benefits of camel milk. Thankfully, our son developed a taste for it despite its saltiness,” says Gulneet, who came across Aadvik Foods, which delivers camel milk directly to consumers and sells through outlets such as Foodhall in Delhi-NCR and various e-commerce platforms. Her son’s health has improved in the past three years, Gulneet says. “I purchase a week’s supply—seven bottles of 200 ml each—from them,” she says.

For people like Gulneet, camel is the new cow. And trying to cash in on this sentiment is none other than Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), India’s largest milk provider, which markets Amul. The cooperative recently announced plans to start selling ‘deodorised’ camel milk (deodorisation is the process to mask or neutralise odour) in India—Amul intends to bring out 500-ml pet bottles that will initially be sold in Ahmedabad by the year-end.

“Camel milk is a niche product and requires a different approach,” says Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, a German veterinarian-archaeozoologist, who has been working with Rajasthan’s Raika community (which breeds camels) for the past 20 years and was among the first to get the camel-keepers to consider dairy farming. “Big dairy companies entering the market may be a good thing,” she says.

In 1996, Köhler-Rollefson set up Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS), a not-for-profit working for camel breeders, at Sadri, Rajasthan, with her associate Hanwant Singh Rathore to sustain the community’s livelihood, as well as their animals. And in 2011, she started Camel Charisma, a micro-dairy in Ranakpur that produces about 150 litres of camel milk a week. “Despite the huge hype, it remains a niche product even in Europe and the US, but is growing slowly and steadily due to its remarkable medicinal qualities,” she adds. Today, Camel Charisma also sells scarves and dhurries (made from camel hair)

and handmade paper (made from camel poo). Unique varieties of camel cheese are also available at the brand's Camel Café (attached to the micro-dairy), where visitors can have 'camelccino', camel milk chai, camel milk ice-cream, among other things.

New superfood Camel milk is sold widely in supermarkets in the UK, US and Australia. Many e-tailers in these countries, interestingly, source it in powder form from India. For the US market, a pack of five 20-g camel milk powder satchets by Aadvik Foods is listed at \$21 (Rs 1,500) on Amazon, while in India, a 40-gm packet is sold for Rs 320.

The opening of camel research and breeding centres in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and, closer home, in Bikaner, Rajasthan, have also given big hope to the camel-keeping community in India and around the world. People are being made aware that the milk can even be consumed raw. Research in 2015 at the National Center for Biotechnology, US National Library of Medicine, in fact, says that camel milk is the closest to human milk. It's no wonder then that it's for long been consumed by the Bedouins (nomadic Arab people) and many other desert communities of the world to face their harsh living conditions. Even though it is low in fat, it has a high percentage of unsaturated fatty acids that are beneficial for the human body. The high vitamin and mineral content is, in fact, what puts camel milk in the category of superfoods. It's suitable for people who are lactose-intolerant and is a natural probiotic drink that promotes the growth of healthy bacteria in the gut. Research has also shown that it benefits people with diabetes and joint pain. Despite its availability, however, India has been a late entrant to marketing camel milk. It was only in December 2016 that the Food Safety and Standard Authority of India (FSSAI) determined the standards of camel milk to be sold commercially. While government dairy cooperatives have been slow to respond, entrepreneurs, including from the Raika community of Rajasthan, had started several initiatives even before FSSAI standards were made public.

"We started our journey with camel milk in 2015. Now, we have more than 40 SKUs (stock-keeping units) of camel milk products spread over camel milk, camel milk powder, flavoured camel milk powder, chocolates and skincare range made from camel milk," says Shrey Kumar, co-founder, Aadvik Foods. The Bikaner-based organisation claims to be the first company to brand, market and process camel milk in the country. There are other players too. Kumbhalgarh Camel Dairy, operated by the LPPS, enables local camel breeders to deliver their milk to customers all over India after it has been pasteurised, bottled and frozen—it's dispatched in thermocol boxes with ice. "Today, breeders know that the benefits of camel dairy are enormous, both as a source of income in rural areas and as a health tonic for people with industrialised diets. It is beneficial for those suffering from modern diseases such as diabetes, autism, etc," says Rathore of LPPS. "But first of all, we need to invest in awareness among the general public," he says.

Meanwhile, in Gujarat, the non-profit Sahjeevan has been promoting dairy farming among camel herders in Bhuj and Kutch, encouraging breeders to sell camel milk to the GCMMF. "Rajasthan has around 3.25 lakh camels and Gujarat around 30,000," says Ramesh Bhatti, who leads the Center for Pastoralism (which works with pastoral communities) at Sahjeevan. The animals are migratory and the tribe is nomadic, so Sahjeevan organises the herds to take turns to deposit milk at a centre in Kutch as they migrate, keeping the milk inflow constant. "There is a sense of optimism and hope among the breeders now, as the sales have increased," he says. Besides Rajasthan and Gujarat, camels are also found in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—currently, India has around four lakh camels, a marked decrease from 10 lakh in 2008.

Beyond beverage

Rajasthan's decision to make the camel its state animal in 2014 led to restrictions on its slaughter, putting camel owners in a bind as they could not sell their animals locally for additional income. This resulted in widespread smuggling to Bangladesh, reducing the number of camels. But now, the domestic and foreign demand for camel milk and other products

has made rearing camels viable once again for breeders. The Rajasthan government has also started awarding Rs 10,000 for every calf born. Plus, the ban on camel trade was lifted this year. All this has greatly promoted the sale of products beyond camel milk, which is also being increasingly used in the culinary world. There's camel milk rabri, kulfi and many other desserts in the market today. The most popular, of course, is camel milk chocolate.

A decade back, Dubai-based Al Nassma Chocolate started selling camel milk chocolates and, by 2015, their artisan chocolates were being sold across the world, including Harrods in London. Closer home, Amul Milk started experimenting with camel milk chocolates in 2017. According to reports, camel milk is now being used by Amul in all the 700 tonnes of chocolate currently produced at the Gujarat plant every month. In camel milk chocolates, the milk component is 24%, which Amul uses for its different texture and taste. Currently, the dairy cooperatives in Gujarat collect 10,000 litres of camel milk per week from the Kutch district.

State of affairs

In India, Saras, a milk cooperative from Rajasthan, introduced camel milk some time in 2010, but had to close down soon because of high production costs and lack of awareness among consumers then. Today, however, the scene is different, with the camel dairy market in India growing consistently for the past two-three years. "When we started, we were selling only a few litres a month, but now, we are processing approximately 8,000-10,000 litres a month," says Kumar of Aadvik Foods, which now sells more than 25 unique products made from camel milk. "What started out with two people has a team of 30 people today. So yes, we have grown multifold in the past two years. With all our efforts to create awareness about the benefits of camel milk in the country, we are expecting to increase the demand to several thousand litres a day/week in the next five years," he adds.

A big plus in the favour of the camel milk being sold in India is that it isn't genetically-modified. "Camels are not tampered with genetically or hormonally," says Köhler-Rollefson of LPPS, which produces only four-five litres a day as against the 40 litres, which is a norm with cows and buffaloes. "Our aim is to provide milk that is totally pure (nothing added or removed and no standardisation of fat content as in regular milk), as well as traceable to specific camel herds," she says.

But the challenges are immense. To start with, there are the issues of storage and transportation. "Camel breeders face huge problems in the form of absence of a cold chain and infrastructure. There is need for investment in a network of micro-camel dairies, where the milk can be cooled quickly and processed. We have made a beginning with our Kumbhalgarh micro-camel dairy in Rajasthan's Pali district, but it requires public investment to replicate this approach statewide," says Köhler-Rollefson.

A point reiterated by Kumar of Aadvik Foods. "The supply chain of camel milk poses a challenge because of its low shelf life. Though we have created cold chain logistics on the supply side and in markets such as Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru and Hyderabad, to reach every part of the country, we had to launch freeze-dried camel milk powder in India," he says.

State governments are doing their bit, too, to promote camel breeding. "The Gujarat government has allocated Rs 3 crore to Sarhad Dairy, which is part of the GCMMF. The construction of a camel milk dairy, with a capacity of 20,000 litres, is also in progress near Bhuj-Kutch," says Bhatti of Sahjeevan. So will camel milk ever take over cow milk in India? Time will tell, but for now, these players seem to be on the right path.