

Now, a safe food colouring agent from red tamarind

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COIMBATORE: While many of us salivate at the sight of red fruit jams, jellies and other delicacies, the presence of chemical colouring agents in the products hold us back from having a mouthful. Products containing natural colouring agents are prohibitively expensive. Now, scientists at the Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding (IFGTB) have come up with a solution that address both the problems: A natural food colouring agent extracted from ratha puli (red tamarind), a mutant tamarind variety abundant in Tamil Nadu. Named Tara-Red, the colouring agent is extracted from *Tamarindus indica* var. *rhodocarpa*, which is known for the pod's red colour. IFGTB scientists had identified the variety in 1998. "We identified 32 samples of red tamarind, of which 30 were from the southern districts in Tamil Nadu," said IFGTB director Mohit Gera. "The variety was rare and its occurrence was one in 1,000 tamarind trees. In 2004, vegetative samples from the trees were assembled at the IFGTB facility in Salem. In 2008, the bioprospecting division took up the study of red tamarind for extracting the pigment to use it as a colouring agent. In 2015, the project was funded by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education(ICFRE), after which the department took full-fledged research on the colouring agent," he told TOI.

Tara-Red has been tested and validated for stability against various parameters. "Stability is the character of a colouring agent by which it retains the colour. We tested Tara-Red under various light, heat and pH conditions and found that it had a good stability," said scientist and group coordinator for the research S Murugesan.

While natural colouring agents are extracted from grapes, cherries and berries, they are expensive, said Murugesan. "But Tara-Red is cost effective, as 1kg of red tamarind costs just Rs 180," he said.

In addition to the stability, Tara-Red has beneficial qualities also, said head of the division of bioprospecting and project lead N Senthilkumar. "We found it to have anti-oxidant and anti-microbial properties. Also, we have used water as the solvent and not organic compounds, which makes it even safer," he said.

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