

How this Faridkot farmer packs a sweet cane punch with innovation

Courtesy: Anju Agnihotri Chhaba



Be it in rural or in urban India, chewing on sugar cane was once a cherished sweet treat. However, over time, the delightful practice became less common in villages and somewhat forgotten in the cities. But now, a farmer from Punjab has breathed a new life into this tradition with an innovative twist. Meet Gurpreet Singh (41) from Sukhan-Wala village in Faridkot district. He reimagined the classic sugar cane experience by presenting it as convenient “sugarcane bites” popularly known as “Gannerian” in Punjab. With this, no longer does one need to peel a cane with their teeth; instead, you can simply open a pack and chew freshly cut cane cubes. It provides one a perfect balance of traditional goodness and contemporary snacking. Experts say that sugar cane in its raw form is not just a sweet indulgence but is also a superfood with significant health benefits. With his innovation, Gurpreet has revolutionised the traditional **sugarcane farming**. His journey from being a struggling farmer to a successful entrepreneur is nothing short of inspiring. In 2013, Gurpreet began his farming journey on his five acres, initially focusing on organic sugarcane cultivation with hopes of supplying it to local sugar mills. However, the harsh reality of inadequate payments from the mills quickly disillusioned him. He then began selling his cane to juice vendors. When that market became sparse, he took a bold step and launched his own sugarcane juice venture, a decision that proved to be a stepping stone in his entrepreneurial journey. “My quest for better prospects didn’t stop there. After three years of the running juice business and

experiencing some setbacks, I started jaggery production. I managed to develop a unique process that extended the shelf life of jaggery to five years. Yet, the pursuit of perfection continued,” he says, adding that there was not much profit from it despite selling different varieties of jaggery. He then thought of presenting cane in raw form to the people. “People like to have cane in the raw form but some find it difficult to peel using teeth. I then had the idea of sugarcane bites. I took trainings in Indian Institute of Sugarcane research (IISR), Lucknow, Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana, and Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) to perfect the new product,” he says, adding that he finally launched the sugarcane bites under the brand name ‘Virasat Gudh – Heritage Jaggery’ about seven to eight months ago as a commercial venture. His bites are now sold in Faridkot and Bathinda and from the next month, he will give his product to distributors in Ludhiana and Chandigarh. From one acre one can get 350-400 quintals sugarcane. “We get 40% (around 140 quintals) in the form of ‘ganneri’ as rest is peel and less juicy portion of the cane. The sugarcane is harvested manually, while cutting and packing are handled by machines. I am now looking at machines to streamline the harvesting and peeling processes. The bites, available in 120 gm and 300 gm packets, are sold for Rs 20 and Rs 50, respectively. When stored in the refrigerator, these bites remain fresh for up to a month,” he says. Gurpreet engages numerous farmers across Punjab and other states to grow cane for him, ensuring they adhere to pesticide-free practices thus helping in diversification. This not only helps the environment but also ensures the health benefits of his products. His sugarcane bites are packed immediately after harvest in special micron polythene and accompanied by biodegradable bags for disposing the leftover, highlighting his dedication to sustainability. “Our sugarcane is handpicked and undergoes a unique extraction process, followed by slow, careful evaporation to ensure that every bite is packed with the authentic flavor of sugarcane,” he says, adding that he has also employed 40 people full time. Emphasising on the health benefits of his products, Gurpreet says that it is rich in around 30 types of essential nutrients, including vitamins and minerals. “If children are given healthy options like these, they will not eat unhealthy candies.” He says that those who chew sugarcane can never lose the enamel of their teeth even in old age and it is a superfood with anti-aging properties. It is also recommended to cure jaundice, he says, adding that it is often referred to as the “nectar of the gods,” with its origins deeply rooted in ancient Indian traditions. Faridkot chief agriculture officer Amrik Singh said that the department is ready to provide any help to Gurpreet’s unique

venture. "Chewing sugarcane is a rare thing these days and this farmer is reviving this age old practice in a modern way which is quite unique. These are a delightful snack that can be used in various culinary creations or as a standalone treat," he says, adding that it is such a sought after sweet that people in both urban and rural areas are buying it and the demand is unlimited. At present, Gurpreet supplies 1,000 to 1,500 packets daily. From his one acre he can produce around 45,000 packets of 300 gm sugarcane bites. Gurpreet's aspirations extend beyond the domestic market. He aims to enhance the shelf life of his products further and is exploring options to export them. His jaggery, too, remains a marvel, with its ability to be boiled in milk without souring. "I want to generate more employment, diversify farmers from paddy and provide sugar bites to everyone because of its health benefits," he says.
