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Sweet tooth alternative for diabetics

08 November 2012 | News

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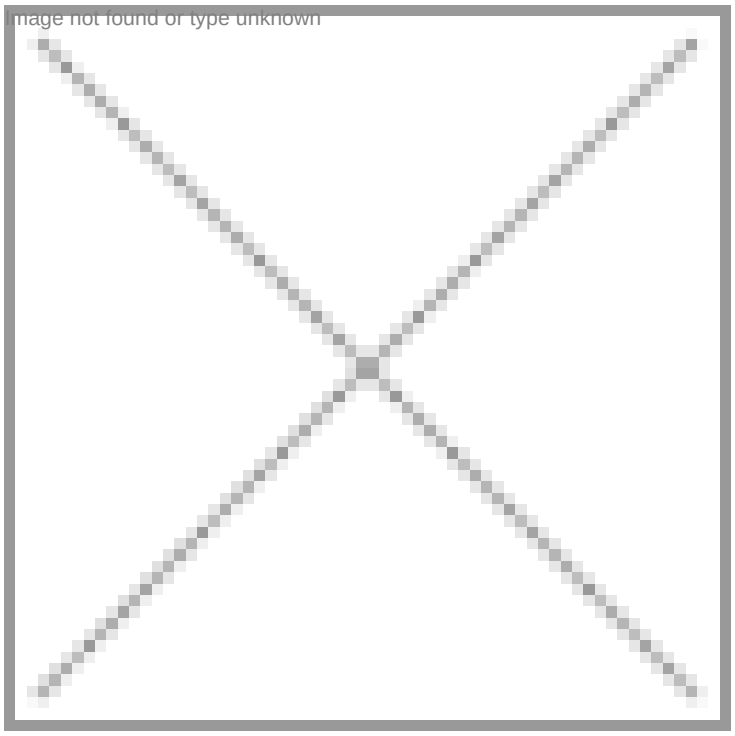

Utilizing the funding from DBT, GVS Biotech has initiated a unique project to produce zero-calorie natural sweeteners from the leaves of Stevia plant

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crease in diabetes cases, India is slowly being recognized as a diabetic capital of the world. As a result of which, we have a huge chunk of health conscious diabetic population looking for a product that could be harmlessly sweet for them to consume. It is thus the need of the hour to have a zero-calorie natural sweetener. Since the plant *Stevia rebaudiana* is known to produce such sweeteners from its leaves, the hopes of having an indigenous natural product have significanly gone high.

Nawanshahr (Punjab) based GVS Biotech initiated the project to provide an alternative in the form of a chemical-free product from sweeteners extracted from Stevia leaves. The aim was to make a product which would satisfy the sweet tooth of the people while keeping them safe from diabetes. The project that was initiated in mid 2011 has reached a critical stage and is fast approaching the product stage. The company received the much required funding of about 50 percent of the project as soft loan by Department of Biotechnology (DBT) under Small Business Innovation Research Initiative (SBIRI) scheme.

With its steviol glycoside extracts having up to 300 times the sweetness of sugar, Stevia plant has garnered attention with the rise in demand for low-carbohydrate, low-sugar food

alternatives. Because Stevia has a negligible effect on blood glucose, it is attractive as a natural sweetener to people on carbohydrate-controlled diets.

Citing the global scenario, Mr RPS Gandhi, chairman and managing director, GVS Biotech, said, â€œChina, which is leading in the Stevia field, has been working on it for the last two decades. USFDA has already approved this product as sweetener besides many other countries like Australia, Canada, Europe, Japan, and New Zealand. We are keen on entering into the Indian market, otherwise India will always be an importer of this product, rather than being a producer or exporter. In fact, it could be the start of sweet revolution in India.â€?

Way forward

Currently while the pilot unit is already working in Punjab, the commercial scale up unit is under fabrication and is likely to be operational for commercial production within the next five to six months.The fact that India is an agriculture dominant country with suitable climate for this crop, the future relevance of the project looks tremendous.

According to the management, the final product has multiple benefits not only for the consumers but for the farmers and environment as well, which has no side effect like artificial sweeteners and since pure Stevia is 300-400 times sweeter than sugar, it needs less space to store. The benefits to the farmers include one-time plantation, five years of crop with cutting after every three months, and more importantly the subsidy granted by National Medicinal Plant Board and National Horticulture Board. The benefits offered to the environment are that, since no chemical pesticides or insecticides are required, the soil becomes chemical free. Also, very minimum water is required by the crop.

Speaking on relevance of PPP in biotech industry, Mr Gandhi opined, â€œIt is an excellent tool for achieving the desired heights of development and for competing with other countries.â€?

Rahul Koul