

Women in Kerala Scale New Heights

Coconut climbing's a family affair as women are fast taking to the profession

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Thirty-four-year-old Praseetha Dineshan from Kattipara panchayat in Kozhikode used to work as a postwoman delivering letters from 8 am to 5.30 pm. No longer. After completing a training course of Coconut Development Board (CDB) for climbing coconut tree using a machine, she has now quit her temporary job and is happy to climb coconut trees to pluck coconuts.

"Yesterday I climbed 15 trees and today I did 20. More and more people are calling me to climb trees and I get ₹15 per tree," she said. She can complete her job by afternoon and can get paid even more. Praseetha is even thinking of buying a Scooty on loan as she often has to hire an auto-rickshaw to reach some of the places where she has to pluck coconuts.

As yet another male bastion falls with more and more women shedding their inhibitions and coming forward to climb coconut trees, the climbing profession may soon become a family affair with the woman and her husband or brother taking up the job.

The tall coconut trees which once gave Kerala its name, and glory, had recently become its bane with a scarcity of climbers. Absence of climbers resulted in the neglect of coconut trees which even led to a decline in coconut productivity in the state.

The physical strain involved in climbing had prevented women from climbing coconut trees. But a climbing machine introduced by the Coconut Development Board (CDB) seems to have solved the problem. The board recently launched a "Friends of Coconut Tree" programme to train unemployed youth in the art of climbing coconut trees and caring for them.

However, the programme has caught the attention of women in the state. The first week of November saw the first batch of 20 women climbers aged between 20 and 35 complete a six-day training at the Peruvannamuzhi Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) of the Indian Institute of Spices Research (IISR) in Kozhikode.

Quite a number of women are now prepared to take up the activity as the strain involved is less with the use of machine. Considering that the charge for climbing a tree ranges from ₹15 to 25 depending on the region and the height of the tree, a family can easily make ₹500 or more a day. That it is a well paying job is without doubt an attraction. The climbing machine is given free by CDB to the people who have completed training. News of the training course is spread through the local agriculture department officer or newspaper ads.

When CDB embarked on this training programme chairman TK Jose had set a target of providing training to 5000 persons. "I'm hoping 30% of them will be women. So far we have trained 2184 people. We expect to train 5000 by the end of March 2012," he said. The feedback has been good which has sort of acted as an encouragement for the board.

Today, the districts of Palakkad, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram have the maximum number of trained climbers. Most of whom come from exclusive women's batches trained from Kozhikode and Kollam. The residents associations in most towns are now engaging them as a team of 8 to 10 persons, offering them better opportunities.

But technology is not enough. A woman needs some courage to take up the job as some trees can be over 60 ft tall. The machine is only an expandable ladder that helps the person



to reach the top of the tree. "You need to have guts and self-belief," says Alice from Kollam.

It is perhaps this self-confidence that prompted the 50-year-old Alice to try a hand at it. "I go for jobs under the national rural employment guarantee scheme and get a daily wage of ₹150. But I can earn more by climbing coconut trees," she says.

It is this lure of earning more that is giving these women the courage to take up a profession that was the sole prerogative of men in the state.

Manoj and Sandhya are a couple who has completed the course and are looking forward to climbing trees. Manoj works as an LIC agent and plans to climb coconut trees in the spare time. "We can even go together to pluck coconuts," Sandhya points out.

Nalini and Ayyappan are siblings who have also joined the new profession together. Women usually prefer to go for the job within the panchayat while men are prepared to go outside their region in search of work.

"Those who know us will keep calling us regularly once we have done the job for them. That way we should be able to get work regularly," feels Geethakumari hailing from Thiruvananthapuram.

Initially, the women were reluctant to take up the profession. "We came to know about this when the local agriculture officer came to have food in my restaurant," said Binu. But the officer was able to convince Binu to send his wife Prajisha for the training as together the two could earn a fairly good income.

Apart from plucking coconuts, the trainees are also given instruction on cleaning and application of pesticide, fungicide and manure etc. Hence in addition to plucking coconuts, the coconut tree owners get these as a bonus. Besides, the board is creating a climbers' bank and directory through which coconut grove owners can hire climbers to pluck coconuts.

CDB is also negotiating with the state government to make subsidised loans available to these climbers to buy scooters. That could help climbers like Praseetha zip their way to their next ascent.