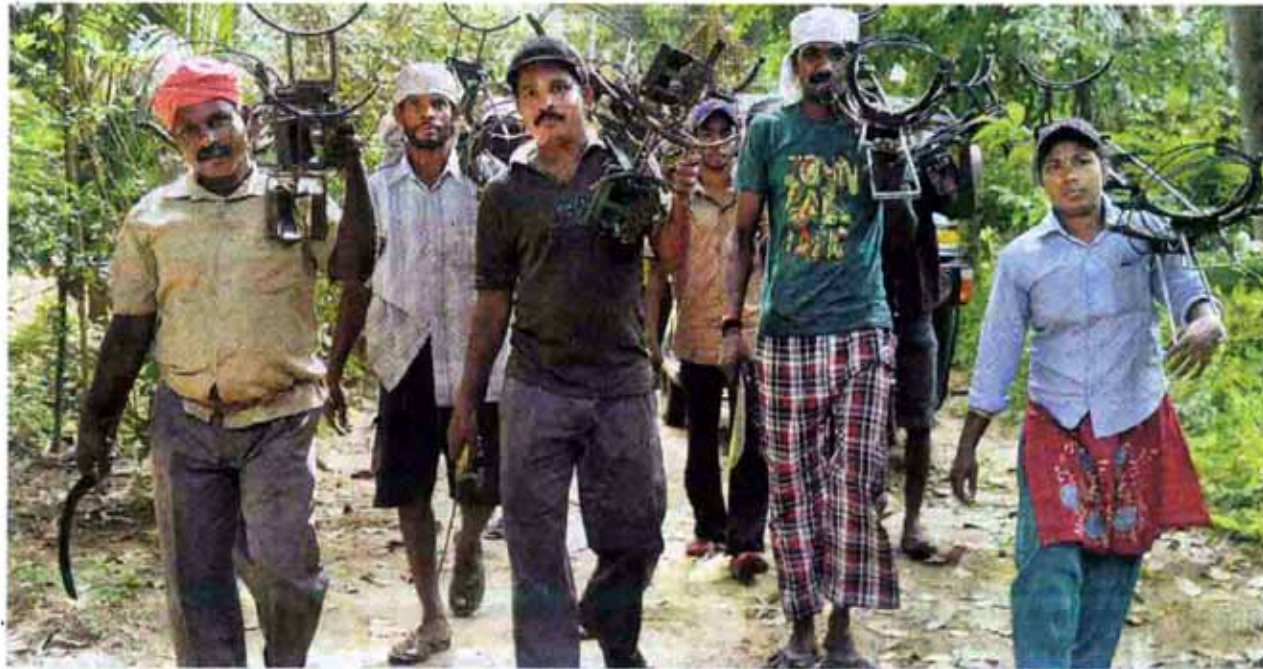


Dizzy heights of 'green collar jobs'



TEAM SPIRIT: Friends of the Coconut Tree members off to work on a site with palm-climbing devices on their shoulders; Martina, the fastest coconut palm climber, of the group.

— PHOTOS: C. SURESH KUMAR

Ignatius Pereira

KOLLAM: Of late, harvesting coconut palms have become a tall order for farmers in the State. Many are even thinking of quitting farming.

However, Kollam is witnessing a trend reversal, courtesy a 35-strong corps of trained climbers. Clad in jeans, T-shirts, and caps, members of the “Thenginte Changathikoottam” (Friends of the Coconut Tree) spread out in different directions from 5 a.m. every day on motorbikes and autorickshaws, in response to phone calls (9447 303811) from big and small farmers.

They take pride in their “green collar job” and even cater to city dwellers owning just one palm or two.

The charge is reasonable — Rs.20 for a palm. If the place is too far from their base, which is Ambalamkunnu, a moderate TA is charged. Bookings have to be done 10 days in advance.

Degrees galore

A team member, Thulasi Narayanan, is a Ph.D. He says he wasted time by joining politics, earning nothing. Now, as part of the group, he gets around Rs.30,000 a month. Another ‘friend,’ Sreemon, has done BBA and is saving money for his MBA. The youngest, Vineesh, 21, is a graduate in Political Science from Sree Narayana College, Kollam. The fastest climber is a woman, Martina, from Kottarakara. She set a record at the ‘Coconut Olympics’ orga-

nised by the Coconut Development Board by climbing a 40-foot palm in 1 minute and 13 seconds using a coconut palm climbing device provided by the Board. In September, she set a record by harvesting coconuts from 120 palms a day.

The team has two ‘masters’, Anil and Rajan, both toddy-tappers. Anil says that demand is heavy and on some days, he takes around 400 phone calls. The group already has clients at Pangode, Anchuthengu and Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district and in parts of Alappuzha district.

Anil says his team practises yoga. None of them smoke or drink. In fact two members of the team who used to drink heavily gave up alcohol after

joining the group. They were trained in palm climbing, using the climbing device, by the Krishi Vigyan Kendram at Sadanandapuram.

Anil says that if farmers feel confident that their palms could be harvested in time, coconut farming will once again thrive in Kerala. With the market price of a coconut touching Rs.25, coconut farming is becoming more attractive, he says.

Apart from harvesting, Anil’s group caters to disease-control measures and adding manure to palms at the right time. Harvesting at the right time is vital for the palm’s health. Delay will result in the nuts losing demand too, he says.