

Kerala's coconut farms get some new 'friends'

With farm workers abandoning the climbing job, Coconut Development Board has launched a trained army of climbers, calling them 'friends of coconut tree'

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TO arrest the rapid trend of Kerala farm workers abandoning the arduous job of coconut climbing, the Coconut Development Board (CDB) has launched a trained army of coconut climbers, under the brand of 'friends of coconut tree'.

With traditional climbers switching over to other less labourious jobs, and youngsters turning indifferent towards it, coconut climbing has taken a heavy toll in Kerala. In many parts of the state, coconut harvesting takes place only once in three or four months against the mandatory exercise in every 45 days. Reinforcing the crisis in the sector, the industries department had even held a contest among entrepreneurs to develop a device that would pluck the nut with the operator standing on the ground. The search for the dream gadget is still on.

According to CDB chairman T K Jose, in a farmers' meeting convened by the board last year, a major issue raised by the participants was the scarcity of climbers. "We wanted the board to design a new crop of climbers which could be adopted everywhere," says Jose.

He says Kerala has 18 crore coconut trees, which have to be harvested in every 45 days. "We may require 40,000 climbers to ensure that the produce is harvested at stipulated intervals to ensure adequate supply to the market. A rough estimate shows that the state has less than 10,000 climbers," adds Jose.

With an aim to train 5,000 youths in coconut climbing with the help of a machine, the CDB identified unemployed men and women with the help of local bodies and coconut producers' societies, apart from other stakeholders in the sector. A six-day training was held across the state in



Among the 5,000-odd trained climbers, over 300 are women. EXPRESS

various batches, imparting the technical skill for climbing the tree using the machine. Harvesting the matured nuts and cleaning the crown of the tree were part of the training session.

The CDB chairman says 5,601 people have been trained as 'friends of coconut tree' since the training started in August 2011. They have been provided with a climbing machine and uniform free of cost after the CDB managed to set apart fund from own resources. Now, the state government has agreed to give 25 per

cent subsidy to the 'friends of coconut tree' for buying two-wheelers.

Of the 5000-odd trained men and women, about 80 per cent have taken up the profession of coconut climbing. It is estimated that a climber if regular in work can easily earn Rs 15,000 a month. Though one third of the climbers were envisaged to be women, only less than 350 underwent the training.

Usha Raveendran, 41, a homemaker at Sreemulanagaram in Ernakulam district, is keenly pursuing



FACTFILE

- In 2010-11, coconut production in Kerala was 5,287 million nuts; area under cultivation declined by 8,145 hectares; production declined by 388 million nuts
- The productivity in Kerala is 12.3 per cent lower than the national average
- Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are leading coconut growing states in the country
- In net cropped area, Kerala is ahead of the other three states
- In productivity (nuts per hectare), Tamil Nadu is leading

the job. "When I started climbing the coconut tree, many ridiculed me. But I was unfazed. These days I climb 20 to 25 trees only, but with experience I would be able to climb more. In our village panchayat only two women had joined as 'friends of coconut tree'," says Raveendran.

Abdul Latheef, 32, a native of Malappuram, had been a painter. But he was attracted to the idea of climbing after the CDB introduced the scheme. "I started the job four months ago. We are collecting Rs 20 per coconut tree. Though the CDB had suggested Rs 10 per tree, many are getting Rs 30 to 40 per tree in Malappuram district. A disciplined climber, who is regular in the field, can harvest nuts from 70 trees a day, said Latheef.

N Sudheer, a native of Aranmula in Pathanamthitta, has taken up coconut climbing as a part-time job. "Last month, I had climbed 340 trees. In our area, there are climbers who fetch Rs 50 per tree from households with only one or two dozen trees," he says.

In the next stage of training, says Jose, aspirants of the programme would be selected after a screening. "We want to focus on major coconut growing districts of Malappuram, Kozhikode, Thiruvananthapuram and Kannur. A village panchayat should have at least 10 'friends of coconut tree'," he says.