



MAN AND MACHINE: A man climbs a coconut tree with the help of the tree-climbing device

Height of friendship... ...on a coconut tree

'Friends of Coconut Tree', an ambitious initiative by the Coconut Development Board in association with the Directorate of Agriculture, Goa, is aimed at training individuals in the care of coconut trees and the art of climbing

JOYCE DIAS/THE GOAN

They may never become a Facebook group of friends who connect. But they are sure to take their friendship to great heights. As high as a coconut tree.

The Coconut Development Board has developed a programme called 'Friends of Coconut Tree'. This one week programme trains people in coconut-bearing states to essentially climb coconut trees, using a very simple machine and education about how to take care of the coconut tree.

This is because once upon a time in every village lived a *padekar* whom people called upon to harvest their coconut trees. Over the years, the *padekar* and his art of climbing the coconut tree went into oblivion.

In 2011, at the Farmers' Training Centre at the Department of Agriculture in Ela, Old Goa, people from all walks of life came together to learn one simple thing – how to climb a coconut tree. There were three batches of

ELA, OLD GOA >>

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20 people in each – the first in Sanguem and two in Ela. "We had an overwhelming response and many people even had to go back as there were only 60 seats for Goa," says Madhav Kerker, Assistant Director of Agriculture (FT), Ela. "There were two trainers from Bangalore dispatched by the Coconut Development Board and they showed participants how to use the equipment to climb the tree," he continued.

Sarvesh Desai from Usgao who works in a private company took a week's leave so he could train here. "I am interested in agriculture and this will help me harvest the trees on my farm," he says. The programme was a residential one (participants who lived nearby chose to go home) and participants were given food and a stipend of Rs 200 per day. After completion

of the programme, the equipment was given to them free of cost and each participant was insured for a period of one year for Rs 1 lakh.

"The equipment makes it easier to climb the tree. I decided to learn because there are no *padekars* left," says Zelya Correia from Batim who studies in Carmel College and trained in one of the batches.

"Now that I have the equipment I won't have to depend on anybody," says Anselmo Dias from Nerul. The participants practiced for four hours every day. The rest of the time they were educated through PowerPoint presentations on pests and diseases affecting coconut trees, harvesting tender coconuts, mature nut identification and seed nut identification among others.