

NRI SIGHTS STEADY INCOME ON TREETOPS

K

eshavan returned to Pattambi two years ago after spending 17 years in the Gulf and soon realised that life wasn't exactly going to be a cakewalk. He tried his luck in business, drove an autorickshaw, but gave up both, for lack of regular

After working in the Gulf for 17 years, Keshavan has taken to coconut tree climbing. So has his wife.

income. Then, he hit up on a 'lofty' idea.

Keshavan underwent a week-long training in machine-assisted coconut-tree climbing under the 'Friends of coconut trees'

scheme of the Coconut Development Board at the People's Service Society in Dhoni. His wife, Rajitha, and her sister Lakshmi followed suit. "We found that there was none to pluck coconuts. The traditional climbers have vanished, and their next generation is not interested in the occupation, which has stigma and risk associated with it," he says.

Rajitha says the decision was easy for her since she hails from a farmers' family at Varode near Ottappalam.

"We have coconut trees in our small farm. But there are very few coconut pluckers, and they charge huge rates. Even for our cooking we have to go without coconut though there are plenty of trees. This gave me the idea of learning coconut-tree climbing using machines."

Lakshmi, whose husband is in the Gulf, says the training gave her confidence and made her self-reliant. "Now I can pluck coconut from my garden. There is no strain," she said.

The other youngsters in the training camp, Baiju of Nemmara and Sharafudeen of Nattukal, are traditional climbers. However, they welcome mechanisation,

through which they earn more and climb up to 100 coconut trees daily as against the 60 manually. The risk is also less while using the machine.

Twenty people were trained in the camp. The trainees intend to form groups of four or five, and undertake coconut plucking from groves on contract for a year. The board provides them subsidy and interest-free loans to buy motorbikes, to respond to customers' calls, and vans to transport coconut.

The major problem faced by coconut farmers in Kerala and other coconut-growing States is the acute shortage of tree climbers, who form a vital link in the production line, says master trainer P. Unnikrishnan. Consistent supply of raw nuts for the market and for the copra and oil processing sectors is crucial for the farmers to earn steady income, he says.

The Coconut Development Board's training scheme includes training in climbing technique, harvesting operations, crown cleaning, pest control, pollination, hybridisation techniques, identification of tender nut, mature coconut and seed nut.



ALL IN THE FAMILY: Keshavan and his wife undergo training in coconut tree-climbing at a camp organised by the Coconut Development Board in Dhoni, Palakkad.