

PERCHED ATOP

A PRECIPICE

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Coconut tree climbers are so rare. Indira Devi, who lives in Thiruvananthapuram, is planning to axe the only coconut tree in her compound due to this. In Kollam, a septuagenarian had to approach the court to get his worker bring down the coconuts while in Kozhikode in the north, a farm owner found no takers for his advertisement offering a handsome pay besides free food and lodging for a coconut tree climber's job.

Their agony sums up the predicament that Kerala has come to live with — an acute shortage of labourers to scale the coconut tree and pluck the ripe fruit. So much that notwithstanding the token remedial measures, the state stands the risk of losing its precious palm cover.

"In 2003, Kerala had an estimated 9.06 lakh hectares of land under coconut cultivation, but it went down to 7.88 lakh hectares in 2008-2009," says M Thomas Mathew, chief coconut development officer with the Coconut Development Board.

More economical rubber crop has along with rapid urbanization has substituted coconut in vast stretches. The state still has about 15 crore coconut trees as per the 2009-2010 figures, but only 30-40% of this is productive. The lack of tree climbers has only worsened the situation. "Though a wipeout may not be in the offing, we may lose our dominant position," says Mathew.

The tale of coconut tree climbers is also one of Kerala's social churning and changes in the socio-economic profile prompted by land reforms, Gulf migration and the total literacy drive.

"In a way, we are victims of our own success. Firstly with access to education becoming easier, people moved away from their traditional jobs. Also somehow, we did not encourage mechanization and hence what we have is small land holdings. This also made the job less remunerative," says G Vijayaraghavan, state planning board member and founder CEO of Technopark.

Traditionally, the coconut climbers come from the 'Thandan' class. But with industrial environment blurring caste hierarchies, they moved to a level-playing field. A Mani Bhooshan, deputy director of anthropology at the Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes calls it a kind of 'acculturation'.

Vellayani Balan, general secretary of the Thandan Welfare Society admits that there were lesser takers in the community for the job. "It is not remunerative. Also, the younger lot who are educated feel it's below their dignity to be seen perched atop palm trees," he

says. The dilemma, however, is not new. Way back in 1993, visionary Ramadas Vaidyar, set up a school in Kozhikode district for training people to climb the coconut palm. The then district collector U K S Chouhan sparked a debate in social circles when he inaugurated the school by climbing the tree.

"The whole idea was to tell the educated, unemployed youth who were going after white collar jobs that there was nothing to feel ashamed about climbing a coconut tree. But I feel things have not improved even after two decades," says Chouhan.

"Labour shortage continues to be a major irritant. Till about 1995, when a coconut fetched Rs 3, the charge for climbing a tree was only about Rs 1 or 2 per tree. Now in villages, the tree climbers demand as much as Rs 25. The irony is that the nut, however, still fetches only relatively less on an average," says Mathew. Mathew attributes the loss of sheen from farm labour to the booming real estate sector and the migration of unskilled labourers to the Gulf.

If that was not all, there was the Eriphid Mite which spread in the late 1990's and the Root Wilt Disease that rendered lakhs of trees unproductive. At least 4 lakh trees, infected by root wilt, are due for axing in southern Kerala. The availability of cheaper substitute oils has been yet another reason for the crunch. "Also in Kerala, most of the cultivations are homestead. So they don't get the economies of scale and expert attention like bigger farms," he says.

The campaign that coconut oil is a source of bad cholesterol has also damaged its prospects. "We are campaigning against this. The National Institute of Nutrition and Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, Kochi, is jointly doing a study and clinical trials are on," says Mathew.

Scientists warn that the loss of the trees, so intricately linked to the state's ecosystem, would be a recipe for disaster. "The ecosystem and bio-diversity created by the coconut farms was one of the integral aspects of the famed Kerala development model. The trees can absorb large quantities of carbon dioxide and prevent the temperature rising. Research has shown that they help improve the microclimate in a major way by assisting the accumulation of many nitrogen fixing and otherwise beneficial organisms on the roots of plants grown as inter-crops between the trees," says V Krishnakumar, senior scientist at the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute.

With rapid urbanization, the state faces the risk of losing its precious palm cover. Adding to the woes is the shortage of coconut tree climbers

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK



An ambitious project initiated by the industries department over a year back to invent a machine to replace humans to pluck coconuts is yet to bear fruit. Nine innovators participated in a second trial run organized at Palakkad on October 26, but none of their models was close to perfection. "There are still some deficiencies. But we think five of them can be improved. These are remotely operated and climb well, but still need some refinement in harvesting the nuts or cleaning the bushy head of the trees," says additional director, industries and commerce, A J Abdul Latheef.

The group of nine was chosen from a list of participants who demonstrated their working models last year at the Vellayani Agricultural College. A total of 21 persons had displayed their innovations before a 5-member technical committee comprising a senior scientist from ISRO, an agriculture engineer, assistant professor (mechanical engineering), a scientist from the science and technology department and a farmer. About 462 proposals were received to the government's offer of Rs 10 lakh cash prize to anyone who came up with a practical design.

Illustration: Gireesh

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G Vijayaraghavan | STATE PLANNING BOARD MEMBER AND FOUNDER CEO OF TECHNO PARK