

Kerala's plucky women

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Women of Kerala are scaling new heights. Meet Reena, who has been trained to pluck coconuts. Those crossing the Pallikkara railway gate in Kasaragod cannot but notice this entrepreneur, surrounded by heaps of tender nuts, most of which she herself plucks. She sells about 200 nuts daily and earns around Rs. 1,000. "After attending the coconut-climbing programme, I'm able to pluck nuts myself and save on the harvesting cost of Rs.3 apiece," the mother of two, who has studied up to Class X, says. She plans to form a women's self-help group to make coconut-based, value-added products such as tender coconut lassi.

'Secure & independent'

"Apart from making me financially secure and independent, this helps me gain self-confidence and self-esteem," she says. Her average work-day lasts 12 hours. Whenever she gets the opportunity, she works as a bus driver as well.

Indeed, with traditional coconut-pluckers turning a vanishing tribe in the State, getting the nut down from atop had in recent years turned out to be a headache. There have been efforts by individual inventors, aided by government agencies, to design and commercialise mechanical climbers that would enable virtually anyone to go up the trunk. And some models have indeed proved themselves up to the task. The tougher part was to get people interested in acquiring the skill. The Coconut Development Board, working through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) of the Kerala Agricultural University and Krishi Bhavans, recently came up with a scheme to train groups of people, including women, to use the devices to climb and pluck the nuts.

Women are better

And, belying expectations, women have proved to be quite good at it. In recent months, a large number of women, primarily in the northern parts of the State, have been trained in going up the tree using the mechanised climbing devices. Women who complete the programme have also been trained and encouraged to take up coconut-related small businesses that they can run on their own. Several of them have started tender coconut parlours – confident and competent enough to harvest the nuts themselves and sell them from roadside units, often with some value-addition. The KVK in Kasaragod, attached to the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI), has organised nine training programmes in which 180 rural youth have participated. The fifth batch of the programme gained media attention as it was an all-woman batch. The KVK training programme in “mechanical palm climbing and plant protection,” is meant to develop a professional group of youths as “Friends of the Coconut Palm.” They would learn to harvest coconuts, manage the trees and undertake crop protection. Many women who have mastered climbing felt the task was daunting initially but soon turned out to be unbelievably effortless. The highlight of the training programmes is exposure to prepare value-added products from the coconut. CPCRI Director George V. Thomas lauded the efforts of the ‘Friends of Coconut Palm’ in making coconut farming women-friendly.

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