

Climbing Coconut Trees . . . past and present

C.Thamban, *Principal Scientist, CPCRI, Kasaragod* and
S.Leena, *SMS, KVK, CPCRI, Kasaragod*

From time immemorial only skilled labourers belonging to certain communities were engaged in climbing coconut palms for harvesting nuts, crown cleaning and toddy tapping. Due to various socio-economic factors, the number of such traditional skilled palm climbers is steadily declining. The traditional way of climbing coconut palm is tedious, risky and requires lot of skill. Now the situation has changed for the better, thanks to the introduction of mechanical climbing device and innovative schemes such as Friends of Coconut Tree (FoCT) promoting rural youth to take up coconut climbing and scientific management of coconut gardens for earning attractive income. This article depicts the profiles of a traditional climber and a FoCT trained youth.

Mr. T. Achuthan(65) from Njeru-Kanhanadukkam locality of Kuttikol gramapanchayat in Kasaragod District, Kerala is a traditional coconut climber who started climbing coconut trees from the age of 12. Family background was not congenial for him to go for formal schooling. Born in a poor family, he was attracted to the climbing profession and followed his father who was a traditional climber. Mr. Achuthan remembers that when he started climbing coconut trees more than 50 years ago the wage he received was one coconut for climbing one tree! Gradually the wage pattern changed. After few years instead of coconuts per number of trees climbed wage was given as nuts per number of coconuts harvested. He



Mr. Achuthan with the traditional 'tala'

used to get five nuts as wages for harvesting 100 nuts. At that time a coconut fetched 25 paise!

Mr. Achuthan recollects that there was heavy demand for traditional climbers during those days as a few persons only ventured into climbing occupation. There was good rapport between coconut farmers and climbers. Climbers were able to render their services to growers as per the requirement.

He used to climb on an average 40 palms per day. His daily job routine started at 7 am and end by 12 noon. About 25 years back he used to get @ Rs 20/- per day. Now it is Rs 20/- per palm! Though farmers may perceive the present wage rate a bit exorbitant, according to Mr. Achuthan labourers are forced to

demand such rates to make a decent living in the present day of high cost of living. He is of the opinion that coconut climbing in the traditional way is quite tedious and involves lot of risk, though he never met with any accident so far in his climbing occupation spanning for more than 50 years. He was very careful while climbing and will avoid climbing on slippery palms during rainy season.

Mr. Achuthan still use the traditional method of climbing trees with a 'tala' the simple indigenous device made of coir which gives grip to feet and hands while climbing the tree. However he feels the necessity for a simple, safe and easy to use device for climbing coconut palms to reduce the drudgery and risk. He is aware about the mechanical climbing

device available but says he is too old to try the same! He once registered himself under the insurance scheme at the grama panchayat office but somehow never bothered to renew the registration.

According to Mr. Achuthan, the crop loss due to incidence of pest and disease in coconut was very low during olden days. The coconut palms were healthy as farmers were able to regularly apply enough quantity of green leaves, cattle manure and ash. Whenever bud rot incidence was noticed on palms he used to help the farmers. Disease management involved application of a mixture of sand and common salt after removing the rotten tissues. Similarly rhinoceros beetles were mechanically collected using beetle hooks.

Now a days incidence of pests and diseases is one of the major problems faced by coconut growers. Achuthan says, bud rot disease is spreading in coconut gardens in his locality. Also both rhinoceros beetle and red palm weevil cause damage to coconut palms. He feels that basically the neglect in adopting timely crop management practices and thereby resulting in poor crop health is the root cause of palms suffering from pests and diseases.

Mr. Achuthan keeps a watch on the changes in the crops and cropping pattern happening in his village. Paddy fields have almost vanished from his locality. When arecanut prices were very high most of the paddy fields were planted with areca. Lack of labourers, increased cost of cultivation and less remunerative price of paddy also contributed to the shift. Now crops like rubber is spreading in the locality. Most of the cashew orchards have been substituted with rubber. Even coconut is threatened by indiscriminate expansion of area under rubber. Some coconut growers have planted rubber under coconut trees. According to Achuthan it is

surely not a good trend. He believes that in the long run it will adversely affect food availability for the local community and this kind of monocropping will destroy the rich biodiversity.

On the other hand farmers also can not be blamed for switching over to more remunerative crops. What is needed is more support to farmers for making cultivation of crops like coconut more profitable. According to him the young generation is least interested towards agriculture as an avenue for job. All are interested in white collar jobs and those less educated go to construction sector. His own son who tried his luck in Gulf for three years has come back since he could not succeed in getting a suitable decent job there and now earns his income as a mason in construction sector.

Innovative schemes are required to attract youth to agriculture. He has heard about the FoCT programme implemented by Coconut Development Board which he thinks is quite beneficial to attract rural youth for taking up a job in coconut sector. He is aware that many young men and women from his panchayat are getting trained under FoCT programme at Krishi Vigyan Kendra, CPCRI Kasaragod. According to Mr Achuthan various activities such as imparting training on use of mechanical climbing device, scientific crop management practices including plant protection measures, and communication and leadership, facilitating purchase of two wheelers, arranging insurance etc being organised under FoCT would definitely attract rural youths. This would enhance their social status. These young people trained as friends of coconut trees are sure to contribute substantially for the revival of coconut sector. Young, regardless of caste, religion and education are showing interest in FoCT programme.

Many people from upper caste getting trained under FoCT indicate the social change and the quest for a remunerative occupation.

'The impact of FoCT initiative is quite evident', says Mr. Achuthan and cites the achievements made by Mr Sukumaran a youth from his native village trained under FoCT at KVK, CPCRI Kasaargod. Mr. Sukumaran(41) attended the fourth batch of FoCT programme at KVK, CPCRI Kasaragod during October 2011. Participation in the FoCT training programme gave him the confidence to choose coconut climbing as the occupation for his livelihood. Since then, he never had to look back and he strongly believes that this programme has changed his life. Earlier he was working temporarily as a clerk in Kuttikkol panchayat and also as part time sweeper in the fire station and earning



Mr. Sukumaran with the climbing device

around Rs.175/- per day and was struggling hard to make both ends meet. Now, he is having regular work and regular income too. He climbs 60 to 65 palms daily and earn around Rs.1000/- per day. When he started this profession, he was charging Rs.15/- per palm, but seeing his commitment to work, now, farmers give him Rs.20/- per palm. Other than harvesting, as per requirement he takes up crown cleaning and plant protection operations as well. During the last south west monsoon period, he had carried out plant protection measures for about 150 coconut palms affected by bud rot disease in his native village out of which 97% palms recovered.

He believes that the knowledge and skills he acquired under FoCT programme really helped him to render skilled services benefiting the coconut cultivators of the locality. Indeed, it was a great help to the coconut cultivators as they were able to adopt timely control measures against bud rot of palms. From November, 2012 he is associated with the coconut hybridization programme being carried out at CPCRI, Kasaragod as a skilled worker. He is working under a labour contractor for artificial pollination work which is a highly skilled activity. Climbing the palm and sitting on the top of the crown to carry out the pollination work is a tedious job since the palms keep swaying during heavy winds. Moreover, the techniques involved in hybridization work require sound knowledge on floral biology of coconut palms coupled with good skill. He is doing pollination in about 25 palms daily which is usually finished by noon. After the pollination work at CPCRI, he climbs coconut palms in his native village during evening hours and even on Sundays which show his commitment to the coconut farming community. Apart from rendering his service to coconut farmers through



Mr. Sukumaran doing pollination

coconut climbing and other crop management practices. Mr. Sukumaran shows keen interest in organising the coconut growers as well. He perceived that it is very much essential to organise the small and marginal coconut growers so that collective action is possible to bring prosperity.

According to him the initiatives of Coconut Development Board to facilitate formation of Coconut Producers Societies, Coconut Producers Federations and Coconut Producers Companies are really beneficial to the coconut growers. He held extensive interaction with coconut growers of his grama panchayat and convinced them about the necessity to organise themselves under the CDB programmes. So far he has facilitated the formation of four Coconut Producers Societies in his grama panchayat: Kuttikkol CPS, Bethurpara CPS, Adur CPS and Puluvinchi CPS. He is also involved in the activities of Kundamkuzhy Coconut Producers Federation and extends his services to them whenever required. Further, he is encouraging and motivating the coconut cultivators to subscribe for the publications of Coconut Development Board. On May, 15th, 2013, he shared his experiences as a skilled professional in coconut farming sector through a

programme broadcast through All India Radio, Kannur. Mr. Sukumaran keeps a record book wherein he neatly and systematically keeps all details about his activities as a friend of coconut palms. So far he has climbed more than 25,000 palms. Today, he is a known personality among the coconut growers of his locality not only as a skilled climber but also as a resource person for various coconut crop management practices.

He is quite satisfied that as a FoCT trained person he is able to contribute to the improvement of coconut sector. He is also proud to acknowledge the social recognition he gets for the services rendered to the coconut farming community. He considers this profession not only as a means of living but also as a social responsibility which is expected from the FoCT trained persons.

Inspired by Mr. Sukumaran's commitment to this job and his success, several youngsters from the nearby areas later approached KVK for getting trained as Friends of coconut tree. As he is very punctual and disciplined in his work, those farmers who had availed his services once, always make it a point to entrust the work to him only which indicates his strong rapport with the coconut farmers. The traditional climbers of the area like Mr. Achuthan heartily welcome the entry of young climbers like him. Mr. Sukumaran's family consists of his wife and two children. About five months back, he has purchased 10 cents of land for constructing house and he expects that the construction work could be commenced in next three months. The success of Shri. Sukumaran shows that each FoCT trained person can substantially contribute towards the improvement of coconut farming. The training ensures their own welfare leading to sustainable development in coconut sector and empowerment of rural society.