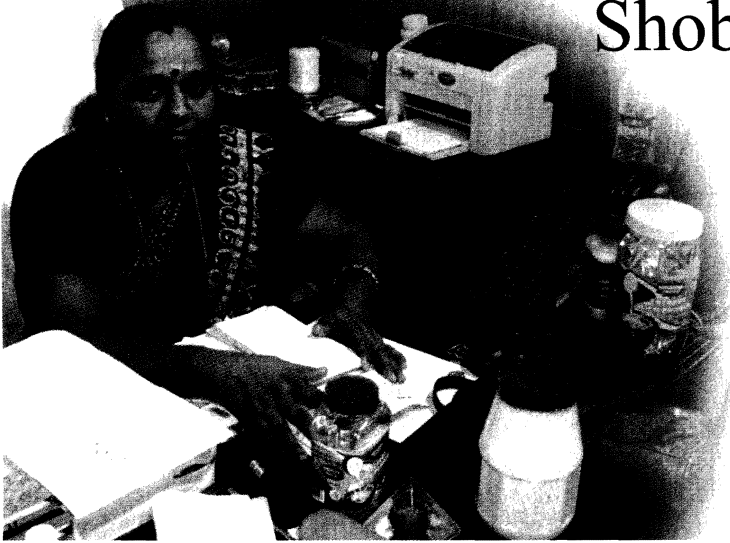


Changing the face of coconut sector... Shoba paves the way

Jayasree A.



Shoba Suresh is the proprietor of M/s. Surya Shobha, the first spray dried coconut milk powder manufacturing unit in Kerala and the second one in India. Spray dried coconut milk powder is gaining importance in food processing sector and as an ingredient in processed foods. Excerpts of the interview with Shoba Suresh.

How did you come to the field of spray dried coconut milk powder manufacturing?

I possess about 25 cents of leased land in industrial estate, Athani. Initially we had an engineering workshop for manufacturing grills and gates. We also had a paper cup manufacturing unit - Sonu Paper Cup. Later on the idea to start milk powder unit came to my mind and we started working on it. At that time we contacted Coconut Development Board for ascertaining the technical feasibility of the unit. On getting assistance from CDB during 2008 we initiated the work for setting up the unit.

Although coconut milk powder is a high capital investment project, what prompted you to enter into this?

With some of our gulf contacts we were assured that there is high export demand for this particular product. We had even identified some buyers before starting production. A group of 40 pravasi malayalees alongwith my husband and myself initiated action and acquired land for setting up an integrated coconut processing unit

at Akilad Beach, Chavakkad around eight years back. But after the tsunami, construction of building was not permitted within few kilometers of the beach and hence we had to drop that project. Since then we both were planning for this project.

For this Rs. 2.07 crore project, Coconut

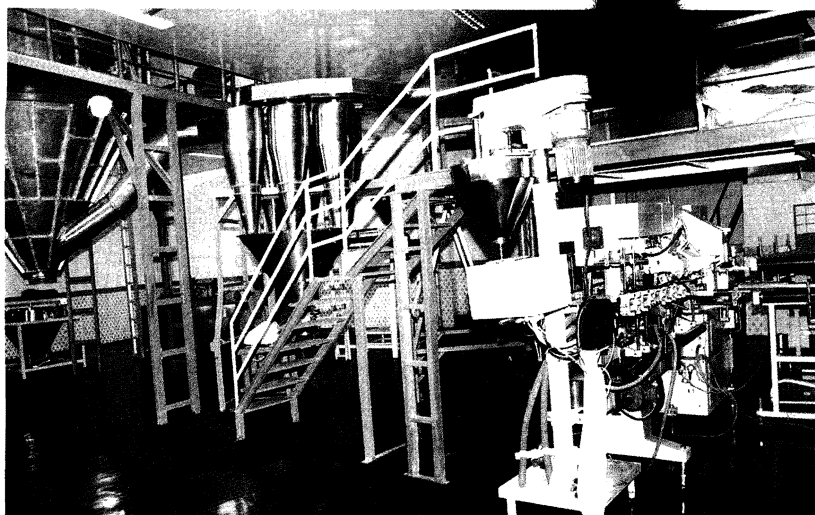
Development Board has sanctioned a back ended subsidy of Rs. 48.475 lakhs under TMOC programme, SBI Thrissur granted a loan of Rs. 80 lakhs and the venture capital from SFAC was Rs. 35 lakhs.

Being a women, what were the initial hurdles faced by you?

The greatest deterrent to women entrepreneurs is that they are women and due to this they are facing many problems to excel in life and business. The obligations at home too bar them from becoming successful entrepreneurs in both developed and developing nations. Their responsibility for taking care of the children, home and older dependent family members ward them off from devoting their full time for business. But I am lucky that I have the support of my family.

What was the attitude of





A view of the unit

What is your raw material source? What is the present capacity of the unit?

We are getting raw materials from in and around Thrissur. We have tie up with farmers for continuous supply of the same. The installed capacity of the unit is 20000 nuts per day. At present the production of the unit is 180 MT per year. The capacity utilisation is around 60% only since the commercial production started last year only. The annual turn over is around 8 crores.

financing agencies while approaching them for financial assistance for a coconut based industry?

The financial institutions are skeptical about the entrepreneurial abilities of women. The bankers put unrealistic and unreasonable securities to provide loan to women entrepreneurs. In spite of the fact that women's loan repayment rates are higher than men's, women face more difficulties in obtaining credit. Financial institutions discourage women entrepreneurs on the belief that they may at any time leave their business. Thus women are forced to rely on their own savings, and loan from relatives, family and friends.

In our case initially the banks were reluctant for sanctioning loan for coconut products since they were of the opinion that it is better to go for any other profitable business viz. biscuit or food products or even leather based shoe industry than coconut. The bank conducted a market survey for ascertaining the product requirements before sanctioning the loan.

Whether the loan sanctioned for

your project was sufficient for starting the project?

Usually the women entrepreneurs are suffering from inadequate financial resources and working capital. They lack access to external funds due to their inability to provide tangible security. The interest free loan from Small Farmers Agri Business Consortium was more beneficial as working capital was the major problem for these type of industries during the initial periods.

With the strong support of your family, I hope you could go ahead very successfully?

The success of a women entrepreneur depends on the support of her family members in the business process and management. Their interest is a determinant factor in the realization of women folk's business aspirations.

My family consists of husband and two children. My husband, Suresh Kumar after his retirement from military services helps in both the managerial and financial matters for the smooth functioning of the unit. He is also looking after the export of the products.

Good matured nuts are required for extracting coconut milk. For that we even pay Rs.18-20 per nut. Knowledge of alternative source of raw material availability and high negotiation skills are the basic requirement to run a business. Lack of knowledge on the availability of the raw material and low-level negotiation and bargaining skills are the factors that affect women entrepreneur's business adventures.

What is your opinion about the technology which you availed from CFTRI through CDB?

We had availed the technology developed by CFTRI through CDB for spray dried coconut milk powder and set up the unit as per their suggestions. We had to make certain modifications later on as per our requirements and fabricated the same. It is a fully automatic system with disintegrator, milk extractor, tank with agitator, milk crusher, sterilization tank and complete spray drier. We had also installed fully automatic line carton packing machine as per the product requirement.

What is the brand name of your product? Do you have any plans for maintaining quality standards for the production as well as for the unit?

Our brand is 'Surya shobha'. We have initiated action for ISO 22000 certification. The building is constructed as per the food safety norms. The concerned authorities have already started the inspection procedures.

Do you have any further plans for product diversification or value addition?

We have already started producing desiccated coconut. There is high demand for coconut milk also. Recently we got an order from Malaysia for coconut milk. We are now trying for the aseptic packaging of the same. We are also planning to set up a virgin coconut oil unit.

How are the products marketed?

We have sufficient orders for milk powder as well as DC. Milk powder and DC were exported to Dubai, Baharin and Australia. Now for an Ireland firm we are supplying 4 MT of milk powder and 10MT of desiccated powder every month. Recently we got a supply order for five containers of coconut milk in 25 litre cans from Singapore. Action has also been initiated for contract with some companies in Sharjah, Qatar and USA. We are also planning for setting up an outlet at Dubai.

For the domestic market we have engaged three distributors for Kerala. The tax for the product is higher ie. 4%. The commission for distribution goes as high as 35-40%.

Are you facing any shortage of labourers?

Shortage of labourers has become drastic in Kerala. The NREGA scheme has increased it further. At present we are having 12 permanent labourers from Orissa. We cannot depend on the daily wage labourers for this type



Another view of the unit

of industry since we have to make prompt supply for being competent in this field.

How was your association with Coconut Development Board?

I should specially mention about the support of the Technology Mission cell of the Board. We were having a close contact since the inception of the project and were seeking suggestions at each step. One of the suggestions to the Board is that awareness creation on value added products to the financial institutions is a must so as to get loans sanctioned without much hurdles. The second suggestion is regarding the preparation of project proposals. The details of empanelled agency with their approved fees may be made available.

What is your message to women entrepreneurs in coconut sector?

Indian women entrepreneurs are making their presence globally. The educated women especially in Kerala do not want to limit their lives in the four walls of the house. Indian women give more emphasis to family ties and relationships and hence family obligations bar them from becoming successful entrepreneurs. They have to make

a balance between business and home to come out dynamically in the business world.

Despite all the social hurdles, many women have become successful entrepreneurs with their hard work, diligence, competence and will power. Ability to learn quickly, persuasiveness, open style of problem solving, willingness to take risks and chances, ability to motivate people, knowing how to win and lose gracefully are the qualities of the successful women entrepreneurs.

In coconut based industries investing money, maintaining the operations and ploughing back money for surplus generation requires high risk taking attitude, courage and confidence. Though the risk tolerance ability of the women folk in day-to-day life is high, in business it is found totally different. Despite the fact that women entrepreneurs are good in giving prompt service and timely delivery the lack of organisational skills is a constraint. If she can overcome this part she can become a successful entrepreneur.

Address: Peringandoor, Athani, Thrissur.

Senior Technical Officer, CDB, Kochi-11