



Tree climbing device: the innovator who climber very high

Late MJ Joseph alias Appachan
Kannur, Kerala

The first thing that comes to the mind when one imagines Kerala is the ubiquitous coconut tree, and why not, Kerala literally means the land of the coconut palm. Kerala and coconut trees have been much in the news together just a couple of years ago. Not any problem with either the tree or Kerala but with the coconut climbers. Traditionally professional climbers (*thandan*) have been engaged by coconut farmers for harvesting. With time the choice of profession has also changed. It has become quite difficult to find such climbers for the farmers. As imagining life without coconut is impossible, the only option available is to find a way to climb the coconut tree. An innovative farmer from Kannur imagined this problem coming almost a decade and half ago and developed a coconut tree climber.

M J Joseph alias Appachan was a school dropout but an innovative farmer. Though Appachan could not

get much formal education, he had the gift to learn from his surroundings. His first invention was an instrument that could squeeze coconut milk and juice from fruits. It could not gain popularity, as the instrument was expensive. He tried several other innovations also but most popular of them even today remains the tree climber.

The palm climber consists of two metal loops that are meant for holding the legs. They have a handle on the top for hand grip and a pedal base at the bottom. The loops are put around the tree trunk on the opposite sides. Loop on either side is lifted up by simultaneous movement of the hand and the feet. By such alternate motion, one can easily climb a coconut tree in minutes.

This simple and easy to use device to climb up or down coconut palm, arecanut or other similar trees is handy for people untrained to climb up such tall trees, swiftly

and with ease. It can be very useful for even trained people. They can reduce drudgery, and climb faster using lesser energy. It can be used for gathering nuts or spraying pesticides. It can also be used to climb electric poles with some modifications.

Appachan and his tree climber bagged a prize in the farm implements category in the Second National Grassroots Technological Innovation and Traditional Knowledge Competition, organised by National Innovation Foundation (NIF) in the year 2001-2002. The utility of this device attracted Kevin Davies, a distributor of new products in USA to place an initial order of 25 units. "The device worked perfectly. I climbed a 40-foot coconut tree very quickly and safely. I am impressed", he wrote with satisfaction. He infact, offered to be its distributor for North and South America. Coupled with some basic safety devices like a harness, this device makes climbing up a straight - trunk tree or a pole quite quick, easy and safe. The device, with no sophisticated technology has not only been well accepted in US, but also achieved whopping success back home (Para courtesy: Honey Bee, 17(1) & (2): 14, 2006).



Appachan had a workshop, St Mary's Engineering Works, where he used to manufacture tree climbers. While he was alive, NIF facilitated sale of his climber to customers in USA, Maldives, Thailand, Australia, Brazil, Mexico etc., and is still trying to help his family expand the business. After his demise this work has been carried forward by his wife, Salliamma. His other family members are also manufacturing this tree climbing device. Some other agencies have tried to copy this climber without giving Appachan's family any royalty or compensation. On an average the family manages to sell about 600 tree climbers every year. Salliamma recently got a few inquiries from Maldives, Malaysia and Philippines. 100 tree climbers have been dispatched to Maldives and order of another 500 is expected soon. Appachan's contribution is not only in innovating this particular tree climber but also inspiring a whole lot of people to improvise, innovate and come up with their own versions of the same. Prominent among them are innovators, Mushtaq Ahmad Dar of Jammu and Kashmir who has developed a smaller pole cum tree climber and DN Venkat of Tamil Nadu who has developed a seating type tree climber.