

Now, neera technicians from Jharkhand, Assam

JABIR MUSHTHARI

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A worker tapping neera from coconut flower.— File photo

Various coconut farmers' producer companies in the State are increasingly deploying neera technicians (people trained in tapping coconut palms for producing neera) from outside the State, including Lakshadweep, Assam, and Jharkhand, in view of the high attrition rate among trained technicians from the State.

According to sources from different parts of the State, not even one-fifth of the total persons trained for tapping flowers of coconut palms under different coconut producers companies registered under the Coconut Development Board are available for the job after training.

The high rate of desertion among the technicians is not only causing huge financial loss to the companies but also putting the nascent neera producing sector in a serious crisis.

Many coconut producer companies in the southern districts have already started engaging people from northern States in the sector after giving them proper training.

The Kaipuzha coconut producer company in Kollam alone has more than 50 neera technicians from other States, including Assam and Jharkhand, working under the company now. "Another 45 people will join us from Jharkhand by the end of this month," said Shajahan Kanhiravilayil, president of the Kaipuzha coconut producer company.

There are around 20 licensed coconut farmers' producing companies in the State now. All of them face acute shortage of neera technicians.

"The problem is that people disappear after receiving the 42-day training, causing a loss of several lakhs of rupees to the companies," says Mr. Shajahan, who is also the State chairman of the consortium of coconut producer companies in Kerala. Kuttiyadi Coconut Farmers Producer Company Limited in Kozhikode recently trained around 375 neera technicians shelling out Rs.24 lakh. "Only less than 100 of them turn up for the job now," says Babu Mathath, president of the company.

"We have also decided to rope in people from Lakshadweep and Jharkhand to use them as neera technicians after giving them training," said Mr. Babu.

The technicians from the other States, according to Mr. Babu, are more skilled, focussed on the job and more hardworking. To surmount the shortage of neera technicians, the companies are also working on some long-term plans, including large-scale planting of dwarf variety of hybrid coconut trees.

"Once they are ready for tapping, farmers themselves can tap them with some training," says Mr. Babu, who is also the State secretary of the consortium.