

0102. SECOND PROGRESS REPORT (Nov 1978)

Describes the next 2 months and begins with a reflection on the role of struggle to give identity and acceptance. Speaks of land and other issues in various villages, and just 1 year after our entry into Bagepalli taluk, already reflects on the Coolie Sangha as a grassroots organisation we would like to build up in the taluk.

We had entered the villages with a conviction that struggle alone would lead to learning, and thus had the determination to face issues squarely. For practical purposes, however we had classified struggles into simple and complex; the former being for issues like drinking water wells and electrification since they do not involve any deprivation, and the latter for issues like land and wages where the people's being benefited would automatically result in some other Group being deprived of what they were hitherto unjustly enjoying. We had said that we should slowly gravitate from simple to complex struggles, taking the latter only when we were sure our base with the Harijans and other labourers was sound.

Issues, however, did not come up in this convenient order. While in one village it worked like clockwork, our Community Worker in another village was put to the test when a group of Harijans approached her and asked whether she would be prepared to assist them in getting back some lands that they had lost to the Landlords.

Very soon we realised that it is only through struggle that a base can be built. We were put to the test, and depending upon the way we face the risks, the people either accept or reject us. We learnt that it was not possible to grade struggles and pre-plan cautious approaches, however sensible this may sound before we actually get involved.

1. STRUGGLE, ACCEPTANCE, IDENTITY

A casual and somewhat innocent question asked by a Harijan leader in one of the villages taught us that acceptance and identity are not to be confused to mean one and the same thing. This Harijan, who accepted the Community Workers rather well asked, "What have you got against our Landlords?"

For time immemorial, the privileged have taken the side of the oppressed only in order to avenge a grievance they harbour against a fellow privileged. Harijans have always been the instruments used to fight the rich man's battles.

- ❖ In one of the villages, a Brahmin farmer had encouraged Harijans to go to court against a Reddy over some land dispute. After some years of a legal battle, the Brahmin and the Reddy got over their differences and today the Harijans face the joint wrath of both Brahmin and Reddy.

Therefore it was quite natural that this Harijan leader presumed that we too harboured a grudge against his Landlord, and were motivating the weaker sections to fight our battle for us. This incident clearly reveals that the concept of an ideological motivation is beyond the people's understanding. Unless and until they grasp the concept of ideological motivation, we can never establish our true identity in any of the villages, however closely we are accepted by the exploited.

2. THE NEED FOR A DIVERSIFIED APPROACH

While poverty, exploitation and oppression are certainly common to all the villages where we are working, we still cannot simplistically identify the common class interest of all the Harijans to be one. It varies from village to village, depending on the level of economic evolution. Their different class interests range from a peasant-like property less interest in Pathapalya, to

a proletarian-like property less interest in Yellampalli. This was very evident from the reactions obtained when an incident was narrated to the Harijans in the villages we are working in:

Gangappa, a sincere and committed Harijans leader from Pathapalya, attended a meeting of the village's Credit Society. At the end of the meeting where they had sanctioned a number of loans to different application he asked about the landless Harijans. Don't bother about them, was the reply he got, if you want a loan we will surely sanction one. No, no, Gangappa said what about all those Harijans who have applied for sheep and have no lands to offer as security? Gangappa they patiently explained, the secret of a good society is that no loans would be given to the landless. It I useless. The society will soon become bankrupt. Whereas is we give loans against lands, then the society will have plenty of lands with it. It will proper and flourish.

- ❖ When Gangappa related this conversation in his own village, the Harijans were quite upset. They said that every effort must be made by him to secure loans for the landless, whom he represented. When our Community Worker tried to make them analyse the incident a little rationally, only Gangappa responded. The other were interested in reform in whether something could be done to make the society operate on a more fair basis.

In Yellampalli, the Community Worker related this same incident through a mono act, the Harijans reacted very differently. They immediately set about the task of analysing the reasons for setting up these Societies and extending credit. The incident, they said, clearly demonstrated that there was no such thing as "help" in the rich man's society, but only "anti-help". That credit was extended solely in order to woo away what little possessions the poor had with them. After all, was not that the reason why Landlords gave loans to Peasants?

In yet another village there was no reaction at all when Gangappa's story was related.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION

The foregoing shows the need for a diversified approach whereby each and every village is treated as a different situation for study and understanding. Proper documentation is extremely vital to thread all the activities together in order to build up a total framework for understanding the taluk as a whole within a scientific discipline.

Each Community Worker maintains a diary, and every week these dairies are condensed into weekly reports for presentation t the entire Group. In these Saturday Meetings, an important task is to tentatively theories observations and daily village events, test the validity of earlier understandings against recent happening, and in this manner identify the logic behind events.

3.1. Lagumaddepalli Land Issue

In this village, where Community Worker Suryakumari has been living for the past 3 months, attendance at the Night Classes was not wholehearted, even if high, for the first 1½ months. One morning, as she was gong around the kitchen gardens, a woman produced a government notice that she had received some time back. Suryakumari want through the browned piece of paper and found that it was from the Assistant Commissioner, asking for a list of documents to be produced in order to decide on 5½ acres of land that 4 Harijans had staked a claim on, 3 years back.

13 years ago 4, Harijans named Gangulappa, Pedda Govindappa Chinna Narayanappa and Chinna Govindappa had written off 4 patches of dry land totalling 5.4 acres to 3 caste farmers from their own village, and a Money Lender from another village. Many years later, they had come to know that there was a moratorium on rural indebtedness, and that it was against the law for Landlords to grab their lands. Acting on this vague hope, they had written to the Tahsildar regarding the 5.4 acres of land.

In mid September 1978, they received a Notice (the second one, it was subsequently discovered) that they took to a literate caste farmer, who dismissed it as an unimportant piece of paper. Chinna Narayanappa's twin, by nature reluctant to destroy Government papers, took the notice to her hut and tucked it away in a corner. This was the Notice that she had decided to show Suryakumari in the last week of September.

Seeing that they had only 3 working days to procure all the documents and appear before the Assistant Commissioner, Suryakumari sent the 4 Harijans to the Village Secretary to ask for the concerned papers. They found him to be very disinterested and uncooperative. Suryakumari herself was persuaded to go the next day. When she could not break any ice with the Village Secretary, she decided to come to Bagepalli with the Harijans, though it meant them an expense of Rs 3.50 on fares and loss of 7.50 in daily wages.

At Bagepalli, we made some initial enquiries at the Taluk office, and pressurised the concerned Clerks to prepare and give 11 document in a record time of 1 day. The Harijans, who had completely exhausted their merge saving on fares and stamp papers, walked back to Lagumaddepalli. Suryakumari stayed on till late evening to finish some pending office work. By the time she returned by the last bus, word had already spread throughout the Harijanawada, and she got a very warm and rousing welcome from the entire labour population of Lagumaddepalli, marking her total acceptance. From that night onward, each and every adult Harijan started attending the Night Classes.

The 4 Harijans, along with our Accounts Admn Assistant, went on the appointed day to the Assistant Commissioner where they pleaded their inability to pay the re-grant fee of Rs 1,222. they were informed that if they had responded to an earlier Notice sent a year back, they would have had to pay only Rs 30. This had increased due to penal clauses for delay and non-appearance.

This provoked a very heated discussion that night in the Night Class. Learner after learner stood up to air his views on the importance of literacy, and how illiterates could easily be fooled and cheated. It was in the Night Class that the people set targets for our literacy programme: that each and every house should have at least 1 literate person.

After 4 more visits to the Assistant Commissioner, the 5.4 acres of land was re-granted to the 4 Harijans of Lagumaddepalli on 17 October 1978. The question they are debating right now is whether they can stake a claim on the 2 month old crop on this land.

3.2. Retaliation and Afterwards

The Lagumaddepalli land issue was, however only the beginning of the struggle that ensued between caste farmers and the weaker section. Caste youth started disturbing the Night Classes from the very evening that we took up the land issue. The lock of the Community Hall in the Harijanawada was broken twice, and a Harijan youth who tried to prevent it was manhandled. Soon the entire episode ended with the embittered labourers seeking the support of progressive caste youth from the village, and issuing a threat to the trouble makers.

Indirect retaliation continued. Since *Vadde Bovi* youth (another labour caste specialised in digging wells and breaching stone) had joined forces with the Harijans, the Landlords saw a threat the Night Classes. A Landlord informed a semi-bonded *Vadde Bovi* maid servant working in his house that if she continued going to the Night Classes, she would be retrenched and made to repay the loan she had taken 5 years back. She did not heed his threat, and was removed from here work for continuing to attend the Class. She is now a daily labourer like the others, and they have advised her not to repay the loan she has taken, since it was the Landlord who had broken the contract. They are advising her not to go back on *Sambalam* (a form of semi-bondedness) ever again.

Our taking upon the land issue in this village has prompted many labourers to come forward with similar problems that need to be solved through struggle. 7 *Vadde Bovis* have asked up to help them challenge the Village Secretary who has been taking bribes to allow them to till government lands. Just the other day, we have succeeded in getting Title Deeds for 3 of them. Another Harijan who has spent Rs 100 in obtaining the necessary papers is now determined to follow up his loan application for the purchase of a bullock cart and bullocks, pending with an unsympathetic Bank for over 1 year.

3.3. The Pathapalya Declarations

In the mid September, a forceful group of young Harijan learners from Pathapalya suddenly demanded that all the Harijans who had submitted Declarations, stating that they were Tenants of 3 big Landlords, should now press the Land Tribunal for grants of ownership rights to these leased-in lands. About 45 Harijans had filled in and submitted the forms over 3 years back, but had not followed up their Declarations for fear of the Landlords. Now this group wanted to go ahead and they took it for granted that Khasim Peera, their Community Worker, would support them.

Khasim Peera, and the whole of ADATS for that matter, had not contemplated such a development at all. In fact, in one of our Saturday Meetings, we had expressed the inadvisability of taking up such strong issues before we were sure of our base.

But 2 things decided the matter for us. The first was Suryakumari's experience at Lagumadepalli, which taught us that without our involvement in people's struggles, we would never gain an acceptance; and therefore it was not that a base was necessary to help us involve ourselves in people's struggles, but the other way around. The second was that the Harijans of Pathapalya were taking our consent for granted and were going ahead with preparation like writing reminders to the Land Tribunal, etc.

Presently, the Pathapalya Harijans are canvassing for support, and at the same time boosting up their own courage for the struggle that lies ahead. Landlords and Big Peasants from the neighbouring villages have assured them of their backing since the Pathapalya Landlords had supported their Tenants earlier. 7-9 October 1978 will be very decisive days for the Pathapalya Harijans, because the Land Tribunal will have its sitting in Bagepalli on those days. Sufficient pressure has been put to ensure that their Declarations come up for hearing.

3.4. Yellampalli

Most of the Yellampalli Harijans don't have any cultivable lands. And surprisingly this is the only village where they do not seem to aspire for any. Nagaraja, our Community Worker, gained a very early acceptance with them when Caste youth tried to pressurise him into leaving his room in the Harijanawada and conduct Night Classes in the main village school building, where they could observe and monitor proceedings. Acting as one, the Harijans opposed this move and prevented Nagaraja from shifting.

The normal caution we found in other villages was absent at Yellampalli, right from the beginning. At the very outset the people explained the workings of PWD Contractors who paid them half of what they got from the government, and more over counted a unit of labour as only three-quarter in order to dissuade the Yellampalli Harijans from seeking work with them. They expressed their willingness to cooperate in any attempt to face, and if possible, circumvent the Contractors.

Even today, the Harijans show very little interest in literacy. They attend Night Classes only in order to sing *Mana Patalu* songs and to hold deep and detailed discussion. Of late, they

have a flare for drama practices, and their discussions are continually punctuated with mono acts, role plays, and skits.

In the first week of September, about 30 men and women walked to the Block Development Office at Bagepalli and listed their demands for a drinking water well, a community hall, repairs to the *Gudi* (the room where their deity is kept), and the construction of Janata houses. The previous night they had prepared themselves thoroughly for over 2 hours, rehearsing each and every possible question they would be countered with.

At the end of a 2½ hour session in the office, they extracted a promise from the President of the Taluk Development Board for their first 2 demands. In this visible demonstration of unity and determination, it was impressive to note the reasoning and argumentation they used before the officials.

Today, 2 months after this incident, the Yellampalli youth entertain very little hope of the officials fulfilling even the 2 minor commitments to build a community hall and sanction a drinking water well. This incident has, however, led to a series of discussion on the Government real motivation to give loans, to extend help, etc.

Analysing rich man's society in general with their Community Worker, most of the Yellampalli Harijan youth agree that there is no such thing as "help" for the poor. They will be wooed with loans to snatch away what little lands they have. These lands would be given to the Landlords through tedious but cleverly designed auctions meant to give an appearance of fairness. The Yellampalli Harijan youth very clearly recognized the overall machinery operating to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few and do not seem to desire any of this "help".

In fact, during their representation at the BDO, they were told that the question of Janata houses would be considered only if they were prepared to leave their present, well situated sites. They replied that they were not interested in Janata houses under those terms.

Their basic aspiration is to get minor PWD contracts for themselves, circumventing the Contractors. Has only been strengthened once they obtained clarity on this type of "help". this is in their own words, an attempt to protect their labour power which is constantly being robbed from them. when we explained that this robbed labour power is the source of all wealth in the world the Yellampalli Harijan youth were vale to fully comprehend the meaning.

Yellampalli is perhaps the only village where the people understand and accept ideological motivations, and therefore we can claim not just an acceptance in this Harijanawada, but also that there is to some extent, no mystery as to our identity.

3.5.. Penumala

This village has been chosen by us very recently. When we first went to Penumala and enquired as to where the men folk were, we were told that they had been taken to the police station. The Harijan women folk were neither sorrowed nor upset. For them, it was just a natural consequence o a very consciously taken decision.

3 years back, the Harijans of Penumala along with all the other Tenant peasants of the village had filled in and submitted their tenancy declarations to the land tribunal, demanding that lands belonging to one very powerful feudal Landlord from the next village be granted to them under the Land Reforms & Tenancy Act. Ever since the Landlord kept his lands barren refusing to lease them out to the defiant Tenants. Simultaneously, he had arranged that the declarations submitted by his Tenants did not come before the tribunal for hearing.

All the Tenants, the Harijans included, had made repeated attempts to at least make the tribunal hear their plea, but in vain. Various well intentioned persons from Bagepalli had also tried their best and yet nothing had been achieved for over 3 years.

In the meantime, the Harijans were growing desperate. Since the barren lands cut out all chances of their earning or tilling their livelihood as labourers or Tenants, they starved. Collecting firewood from the nearby forests became their only source of income. In utter desperation, they finally decided to take matters into their own hands, and started to till 6 acres of wet land under an irrigation tank. The Landlord gave a police complaint, and the Harijans were warned to stay off his lands. In spite of this the Harijans continued their tilling and pre-sowing operation, and this provoked the police to finally book a cast against them.

It would be wrong to attribute this rebellion of the Harijans as motivated by ideological considerations. Sheer hunger and a sense of depression alone led to their taking ploughs against the Landlord. Neither was any outside activist involved in their decision.

Our involvement in this village has only been for a week now, and it is much too early for us to intervene, except to assist them in whatever manner they demand. They are very interested in our Night Classes and are attending with great enthusiasm.

4. COOLIES SANGHA

Responding to an intense desire of the Harijans we are now in the process of forming and registering a Coolies Sangha (Labourers Association). *Vadde Bovis*, Harijan and other labourers from the villages where we are working will be Members of this Sangha. Once we get it recognised by the government of Karnataka, then the Sangha will get preference when PWD contracts are offered in this region.

But in actual practice, things may not work in an ideal manner. In the initial stage, when we will be taking upon only small works in order to gain technical and procedural experience we do not anticipate any opposition from the contractors but once we begin to take up slightly larger works we are bound to face their stiff resistance. But by that time, we too would be ready to stand up to it.

The Coolies Sangha would not be restricted to being a people's contractor alone. It would soon become the grassroots organisation we intend building up in this taluk.

While the Yellampalli Harijans express that the object of this Sangha should be to save or protect their labour power, the Lagumaddepalli *Vadde Bovis* want to build it up with strong connections from village to village, so that each individual member's bargaining power gets multiplied. In Pathapalya also the idea of the Sangha has caught on very fast, and the people of all the villages are planning for common funds in order to enable the Sangha to function without too much financial botheration.

Since PWD contracts can be taken up only after a few months when the tanks dry up and the fields are all harvested, we have the next few months ahead of us purely for organisational and educational activities. Our education at the moment will be only in order to make the people realise that the switch over will not be from a bad, unjust contractor to a good, considerate one, but from contractors to no contractors, without the people realising this fully, the Sangha cannot function democratically, it could very easily become a big and powerful exploiter that the people could never fight against, since it would have the appearance of being for and by the people.