

## 0107. 7<sup>th</sup> Progress Report (Sep 1980)

*In this Report on the next 5 months, we describe various village level struggles. We debate on the ADATS Group's political perspective, and then comment on the drought and Government measures to provide relief.*

In the past one year the Coolies Sangha Units have become much stronger. At the taluk and district levels, they are a force to be taken into account when considering any programme of mass mobilization. No more are they a mere handiwork of a group of young people who had started out to seek a viable and effective alternative to conventional development work. In this context, our role has to be re-examined and clarified for ourselves through a process of informal debates, studies and critical self examination.

While a whole lot still remains to be done to give the CSUs and Bagepalli Coolies Sangha a concrete structure as one that will ensure the pursuance of a definite direction and goal, we are satisfied with the progress made thus far. Concrete experiences are giving us, as well as our cadre a clearer vision of how the organisation should shape out.

In the past one year, our Group has learnt a lot. It was a very full year with rich experiences that have deepened our understanding of society on the whole and made us to make irreversible choices and commitments.

The starting of the NOVIB supported project in July 1980 eased financial restraints and permitted us to work unhindered by interruptions and uncertainties. We will now try to share our experiences by narrating some of the struggles of the labourers, our reflections, the lessons learnt from them, and also the main debates in our Group as well as amongst the people.

### 1. ISSUES AND STRUGGLES

#### 1.1. Somnathpura Youth Rebel

A touring drama troupe visited Somnathpura village. There was the usual excitement that marks such events, and the people all voluntarily erected a temporary stage for the actors. A Harijan youth was deputed to collect leaves and twigs to build a roof over the stage. He went to a nearby field where he climbed a tree and was felling the twigs when the owner of the land and his brother arrived and ordered the youth to get down. First he was abused, and then the Landlord gave vent to pent up indignation at the labourers of the village organising themselves. He was beaten up for trespassing and "stealing" the twigs.

The Harijan youth returned to the village with his bruises and explained what had happened. The other youth were furious because that particular tree was always used for such purposes. And more so because the Landlords had actually waylaid one of them, not having the courage to risk a more open confrontation. 14 youth went to the nearby hamlet where the Landlord and his brother lived.

On arriving there they found the hamlet deserted except for the 2 brothers. Panicking at seeing so many Harijans youth approaching, the Landlords picked up some firewood and attacked. This was too much for the youth, who were already in an excited mood. Though they had planned only a verbal confrontation, they fought back and thrashed the brothers with *chappals* (a great injury to pride and position), and warned them to behave. That evening, the drama went off peacefully.

The next morning, all hell was let loose. Nearly all the Landlords of the area gathered at the house of the Brahmin Landlord of Somnathpura and expressed their horror at what had happened. The 14 youth were summoned but they refused to go, preferring to boycott Landlord

justice. It is only at this stage that their parents, active members of the Coolies Sangha, and Community Worker Sathyamurthy, realised what had happened the previous evening. The older Harijans were summoned by the Brahmin Landlord who told them that matters had come to a head. A police complaint had to be lodged. The Harijans retorted that they too would lodge a counter-complaint and walked away to Sathyamurthy's house. There they were writing out the counter-complaint after getting the youth's story, when the Brahmin Landlord again called them, this time more politely.

He said that he had reflected on the whole matter and it was his feeling that it was not good to let village matters stray in to the hands of the police. He further observed, even more wisely, that both sides had resorted to beating, and that it was the 2 brothers who had provoked matters by beating a lone Harijan boy and later once again provoked a fight instead of talking matters over with the youth who visited them. In his opinion, therefore, the facts were clear and detailed. There was really no need for further deliberations, and instead a *Panchayat* (sitting of elders to hear complaints and pass judgements) was unnecessary. As he was talking, it became clear to the Harijans that the Landlords were stepping down since the beating of a Harijan was a grave offence once brought to the notice of the police. The Harijans were quite pleased with the outcome of events. But, continued the old Brahmin, the fact that youth (whoever they may be, he hastened to add) had dared to hit their elders with *chappals* was quite another matter. It was the responsibility of the leaders to correct this sort of disrespectful behaviour. Therefore, he concluded, let the 14 youth each pay a fine of Rs 5 to the elder Harijans and this amount be used for the temple in the Harijanawada.

With his cunning, he managed to confuse the issue quite thoroughly. Our Community Worker was asked to convene a meeting in the evening between the youth and their elders, who were by then in a regular tug of war. The entire episode was discussed and most Harijans agreed that the Brahmin's decision was indeed a wise one. But the youth were adamant. They flatly refused to pay the fine. At this stage, Sathyamurthy had to do something that we normally refrained from. Though, earlier in the meeting, he had only explained the cunning of the Brahmin in confusing the issue, he now said that he felt obliged to admire and support the youth in their defiance, though they were out numbered in the CSU Meeting. Seeing Sathyamurthy's anger, many elders diplomatically backed down from their earlier stand. Later they all agreed that some Landlords wholly deserved to be beaten by *chappals*, but that the prospect of collecting Rs 90 was too great a temptation...

## 1.2. The Tamarind Trees Auction

43 Harijan families from Somnathpura approached their Panchayat Chairman for an allotment to repair and de-silt the drinking water well in the Harijanawada. In addition to this work being necessary due to water shortage, the labour it would provide was also very necessary at that time. They were bluntly told that the Panchayat was bankrupt. They were given a pious lecture on how it was quite within their means to themselves de-silt the well without expecting outside assistance. The Harijans were irritated with this high sounding advice from those who couldn't themselves manage without their incomes artificially augmented by the Government through bogus contract works, bank loans, etc. So, reminding the Chairman that they come for an allotment and not for advice, they returned.

A few weeks later, they learnt that about 20 tamarind trees had been auctioned by the Panchayat. Once again, they approached the Chairman, but were told that the trees had raised only Rs 300 in the auction. This was not enough even to pay sweeper salaries. Furious at the bogus auction that had yielded such a paltry sum for trees that were worth at least 10 times more, the Harijans made a solid racket in the village, abusing the old Brahmin Landlord in the streets. The situation became intolerable for decency and the Landlords agreed by 3:00 a.m.

the next morning to hold a re-auction, this time in public. Even the Landlord who had purchased the trees for the paltry sum of Rs 300 and obtained a valid receipt from the Panchayat did not dare press any counter claim.

In a severely competitive and slightly drunk mood, the Harijans purchased the trees in the re-auction for Rs 1,200. They had to immediately deposit 10%. They somehow raised this through door to door collections and obtained a month's time to pay the balance. With Sathyamurthy's and another Community Worker's help they managed to re-sell their trees to a merchant and managed to make a profit of over Rs 600 on the deal. Quite logically, they shared the profit among themselves, damning the well which could very well wait for a Panchayat allocation.

### 1.3. Yellampalli Water Tap Issue

About 6 months back the Panchayat got drilled a 6 inch bore well which struck abundant water. The PHE department of the government came forward to fit an electric pump, construct an overhead tank, lead pipelines to the entire village, and provide public taps. The Harijanawada got its share of one tap for about 50 houses, and this greatly eased the labourers difficulties (they previously had to trek about a mile and back for water).

At about the same time Keshava Reddy, a powerful landlord from a neighbouring village, started constructing a large groundnut mill just outside the village. The Harijanawada lay between his mill and the overhead water tank. He corrupted the Panchayat chairman and managed to get a connection from the pipeline that previously ended with the water tap of the Harijanawada, though this water was meant exclusively for domestic purposes according to the PHE rules. Not just that, he managed to lay a 2 inch pipeline to his site though the rest of the water system was only three-quarter inch in diameter. This resulted in the Harijanawada water tap running dry and all the water draining into an underground tank that he constructed at his mill site.

The Harijans preferred not to quarrel since they were already so busy with the NR works. Instead, they went to the underground tank at the mill site for their water. But as the growth advanced, water shortage hit the villages and they were prevented from "trespassing" into the mill site. When one of Keshava Reddy's persons broke 2 pots Harijan women had brought to collect water, and threatened to put some DDT powder into the water tank to prevent them from coming, tempers flared.

Losing a day's wages, 50 of them marched to Bagepalli, 6 kilometres away, to complaint to the Block Development Officer. The BDO dealt with them tactfully, and promised to ask the Panchayat to disconnect the illegal connection to the mill site. By the time the people returned to their village, the connection had indeed been cut and blocked. Satisfied, they resumed their normal chores.

In the evening, when water didn't flow in the village taps, no one took it seriously, assuming some technical defect or power cut. But the next morning, when there was still no water, they approached the Panchayat appointed pump set operator and asked him what was wrong. He told them that the chairman had left on a 5 day tour the previous evening instructing that water should not be pumped till his return. Even his keys had been taken away, he said.

Almost all the caste people, labourers as well as peasants, begin to mutter against the Harijans for having caused this inconvenience. This was very irrational since the previous day the entire Coolie Sangha had endorsed and appreciated the action of the Harijans. The Harijans, along with Nagaraja our Community Worker, intuitively sensing a great danger, immediately left the village and all came to Bagepalli to discuss the matter with us.

To us, it became clear that Keshava Reddy and the chairman were playing a very dangerous game of setting the caste people against the Harijans and realised that this was no time to reason or debate. We rushed to progressive taluk leaders who also understood the gravity of the situation in Yellampalli. They went en mass to the BDO and forced him to immediately send his engineer to resume pumping, superseding the orders of the chairman to the pump operator. The BDO, when warned that otherwise he would be held squarely responsible for any communal incident that might take place, saw light and sent his men by jeep.

We then returned to the waiting people and explained the tactic of the landlords. When we explained how, for much more trivial reasons, major communal clashes had taken place in Karnataka even in recent weeks, the people began to understand, we asked them to defuse the issue immediately till we were able to spread to the caste people and reason with them (for which the time was certainly not ripe just then).

When the Harijans returned to Yellampalli by noon, they found that the BDO's engineer had physically been bullied by Keshava Reddy himself to disconnect the pipeline to the Harijanawada itself, before pumping water to the over head tank. They returned to Bagepalli once again that afternoon.

This time we had a long meeting where we counselled patience and decided to send lengthy telegrams explaining the entire episode to higher officials at the district and state levels. We also decided to send 2 teams of Harijans to Kolar and Bangalore to gain the sympathy of higher officials.

The 3 people who went to Kolar reached to meet the District Magistrate/Deputy Commissioner (DC) late in the evening. They were able to win his sympathy with an honest narration of everything that had happened. And he promptly passed a Magisterial Order asking water supply to be resumed to the Harijans the unauthorized tapping of water by Keshava Reddy to be stopped immediately and to ensure that Harijans were not harassed in any way. He handed over the order to the Harijans and asked them to hand it over to the Tahsildar, however late it was. The people hitched a ride in a lorry, and it was well past midnight by the time they met the Tahsildar.

The Group that went to Bangalore were able to impress upon the DIG of Police in charge of our Taluk who gave them a patient and sympathetic hearing and wireless messages cautioning against possible communal outbreak in Yellampalli village.

The next day, a furious Tahsildar went to Yellampalli and reconnected the pipeline to the Harijanawada and disconnected the line to the mill site of Keshava Reddy.

By then, tempers had cooled and we were able to have reasonable discussions with the 400 odd families of caste labourers in the village. They realised how it was so easily possible for landlords to stir up caste and communal feelings and how readily they had fallen into the trap. Many of them were quite ashamed of their irrational behaviour against their comrade along with whom they had so successfully challenged PWD corruption and official opposition. For us, these meetings and discussions were very useful to assess the real impact of our work in Yellampalli village, in terms of education and politicisation.

The next day, some caste people (Middle Peasants, etc.) from Yellampalli visited us at Bagepalli for the first time and very decently took the responsibility for almost having let matters go out of hand. They regretted their stupid behaviour very much, and assured us that whatever be their complaints against Harijans, they would never again let communal tensions build in the village. We were very surprised at these unexpected visits. In the meantime, public opinion in Bagepalli town turned very much against Keshava Reddy and the chairman for the cheap, lowly and dangerous game they had played. We personally witnessed an unusual scene where Keshava Reddy was heckled by his own fellows in the town's main bazaar.

A few days later, in spite of our decision to defuse the issue and only explain what had happened, Nagaraja and 3 other Harijans were arrested by the police on the bizarre charge of destroying public property! Though we made every effort to have them released on bail that evening itself, they were made to spend a night in the police station before being produced before the Magistrate the next morning. There they were released on bail even in spite of the police objections. The arrest only served to attract more sympathy for the Harijans of Yellampalli.

Just before the arrest, the caste labourers had stoutly resisted Keshava Reddy and the Chairman's attempt to have Nagaraja evicted from his rented house in the village. And soon after the arrest, caste and Harijan youth together enacted a traditional drama to show that old mistakes were forgotten.

The water tap issue of Yellampalli shows all the dangers of working with just one oppressed caste. It also shows that we cannot be too careful when dealing with unscrupulous persons who will stoop to anything in order to gain advantage. Had a caste tension erupted in the village, matters would have gone well out of our hands and provided the bureaucracy with the perfect handle for taking action against our organisation.

## 2. DEBATE ON THE GROUP'S POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Though we had always purported to be Left in our political leaning, recent developments in Karnataka as well as in our taluk threw this sensitive but important issue to debate once again.

The Bagepalli Bund, which was called for by the united opposition parties on 7 August 1980 to protest against police firings on agitating farmers in Northern Karnataka and other economic demands of a peasantry caught in an economic crisis in the country, was a great success in terms of mobilization. Though the organisers expected it to be a token protest, over 4,000 people turned up. Small peasants and labourers, fed up with the corrupt administration and failing economy, swarmed in to the town outnumbering the *Ryots* 4 to 1, though the main organisers of Bund was the *Ryot Sangha* (Peasants Association) of the left parties. Further, this was the first time that labourers had come on their very own, influenced by their own consciousness rather than by any local leaders. Earlier mobilisations of labourers for public meeting could be effected only by village leaders from among the peasantry arranging their food and transport, in order to impress upon their party bosses their mobilization capacities. This time, since the Bund was only a token protest, and also because of the financial restraints due to the sixth year of drought, these self appointed leaders had not bothered to "bring" their people. Yet, the massive turnout.

The turnout was as much a surprise for the police as for the organisers. The former lost all sense of proportion and converted the otherwise peaceful Bund into a bloodbath leaving 2 dead and scores wounded. We immediately abandoned our aloof attitude towards the Bund and rendered as much first aid and medical help as possible, taking the victims to the government hospital at Bangalore, etc. this immediately invited serious enquiries on the nature of our work and our affiliation from the local police as well as state Government. It is at this stage that the first murmurs questioning the prudence of our involvement started in our Group.

The Bagepalli Bund was followed by 2 weeks of picketing the Taluk office and the Block Development office. Because of the earlier show of political awareness that the labourers had displayed the organisers were obliged to seriously include labour biased demands this time. They demanded that the Taluk be immediately declared a drought and famine hit area, and massive relief works to provide labour be started in all the villages. Once again the labourers turnout was very impressive and everyone conceded that a great deal of the credit for the

picketing being disciplined, peaceful, and successful in spite of being so long drawn out, went to them.

By now the labourers of the entire Taluk and specially our CSUs were very deeply involved in the agitation, emotionally as well as physically. It became imperative for us to clearly spell out our perspective in order to rationally understand and react to this involvement.

The debate that followed was not, however a fully rational one since discussions were often not based on theory, but on haphazard observations and wrongly understood personal experiences. Therefore, we decided to go deeper into a study of the classics. Some of us felt very strongly that a great deal of liberal thought was creeping into our thinking since we were so deeply immersed in the day to day activities of pure organisational work, moving from crisis to crisis and issue to issue. We saw a danger in this liberalisation shifting us from the mainstream of reality to either sharpening conflicts without widening our base (as we had blundered in Pathapalya), or leading us into mere human rights campaigns without understanding greater socio-economic realities. We felt that we needed greater clarity on questions like the role of left parties and sanctions of society and dialectical relationship between the different mass organisations; the choice between organising different sections of society and our own role and contribution in the long term, etc.

A large number of labourers from our villages attended the *Ryot Karmika Morcha* (Peasant Workers March) in Bangalore where factory workers showed their sympathy towards peasants caught in an agrarian crisis. The Farmers Jathra, a long march of 200,000 peasants from all over Karnataka to Bangalore, in which 150 of our active Coolies Sangha Members voluntarily participated in spite of having to walk over 100 kilometres and back and face innumerable other hardship clenched the issue. We had to take a definite stand.

We had a month's serious study in Bagepalli where we went through selected texts. This was followed by lectures on political economy. But the sessions and lectures on philosophy had to be indefinitely postponed due to serious developments in the villages as well as within our Group.

The study and debate threw into sharp focus the existence of 2 lines of thinking within our Group. But once the liberal radicals were outnumbered, they very soon preferred to remain silent and listen to the others view points rather than have a dialogue. We all saw this as a dangerous development, but since very basic values were involved we were unable to overcome this barrier. This debate was closely linked up with our individual choices with regard to a future in the Taluk in the long term. And as always happens when discussions reach this point of sharpness, personal differences that the 2 had for years learnt to put up with, started to surface. While one of our Group members left, another agreed to stay and reflect on the majority's view point.

The latter expressed his wish to stay with us at Bagepalli for a week, in order to reflect and observe the working rationale behind our opinion that we should collaborate and become one with the total Left and democratic movement in the Taluk, while at the same time keeping our strictly separate identity and independence. While we still want to complete our study program before explicitly spelling out our perspective our tentative position is more or less as follows:

We recognise that all sections of society, with exception of the ruling bourgeois and feudal landlord classes, should be taken along in a revolutionary struggle. And this is the function of the left parties in the Taluk and the rationale behind the Left and democratic movement.

Therefore, it would not only be romantic, but also wrong to expect the Left parties to have no truck with the exploited Middle Peasant class who are in fact our main oppo-

nents when working with agricultural labourers (it is this Middle peasantry that we refer to when we speak of Landlords, because they uphold the Landlord value system of feudal oppression even more than the real Landlord class due to their constant fear of being pauperised and thrown into the folds of the landless). To criticize left parties of being weighed heavily by this Middle Peasant representation would be blind, because till we started 3½ years back there was only the *Ryot Sangha* in the Taluk. It is only now then the *Coolies Sangha* is emerging as a real force in the Taluk that we can expect labour representation and labour biased programmes from the local Left parties.

Secondly we do not confuse the *Coolies Sangha*, essentially a mass organisation, with the Left parties political organisations, our Group members are full timers in the construction of the mass organisation for labourers and have nothing to do with either the *Ryot Sangha* or the Left parties. It is for the Left parties to take the organised labourers with the offering of leadership and clarity on wider issues. But we expect them to show a partiality to the *Coolies Sangha* over the *Ryot Sangha* since labourers are definitely a more advanced revolutionary class than property aspiring peasants.

Thirdly, while recognising that there are 2 main contradictions in the countryside – the first between labourers and the peasantry; and second between the peasantry and finance and merchant capital represented and protected by the State, we, as a Group choose very explicitly to work with the first contradiction, supporting the labourers in their struggle. But at the same time we will not fall into the liberal trap of opposing the right of the peasant to struggle against their oppressors- the State. This is exactly the mistake that the State would like sincere social workers to commit, and that is the intention behind legal social laws favouring tenants and agricultural workers, by which they hope that the vision of the real oppressors, themselves, will be deemed in the eyes of the poorest of the poor fighting their immediate oppressors-the peasantry. Whenever labourers intuitively make the correct decision to lend a helping hand to the peasantry (as in the case of the Bagepalli Bund and the following struggles) we will not oppose this. But we do not feel it advisable to openly suggest this cooperation, in the interest of keeping our identity commitment and priorities clear.

Fourthly, we see a great danger in the extremist politics of working with the sole objective of gaining the total trust of the poorest of the poor in order to sow seeds of class hatred and develop “hardliners” from among their ranks, hoping that an ever increasing number of these “hardliners” would “purify” society of its evils. We recognise this to be anti-dialectical and not at all based on the understanding that dialectics between classes leads to societal progress.

The broad points on which our Group is now in unanimous agreement have not been developed in a vacuum. They are a result of being sensitive to concrete current events in the villages as well as at a higher level, and also take into serious account the intuitive understanding of the people we are working with. We therefore view it as a logical development of our Commitment to work with agricultural labourers in the Taluk. But they have to be further examined; in a theoretical perspective, and we are very keen to complete our study programme as soon as possible.

### 3. SATHYAMURTHY LEAVES ADATS

In the last week of February, Sathyamurthy our Community Worker from Somnathpura, suddenly informed us about his and his wife’s decision to leave ADATS and the Taluk by the month end. In spite of differences that had cropped up between us, his being one of the founder members of the Group and very good organiser, made us try our very best to make him change his mind. No amount of persuasion worked, and they said that they would like to start

elsewhere, on their own. When we pointed out that his sudden departure could weaken the Coolies Sangha units in the Somnathpura Cluster of villages, Sathyamurthy disagreed. But an issue that came up literally on the heel of his leaving made us realise that the labourers of that Cluster were much better organised than we had given them credit for.

### 3.1. Somnathpura School Day Celebrations

2 nights before Sathyamurthy left Somnathpura for his native town, a send off celebration was arranged for him by the labourers of the 5 villages which make up the Cluster. Children performed kolattam dance and sang songs to make the whole thing a very warm and touching affair. The next day was their School Day for which the Assistant Education Officer (AEO) and the Inspector of Schools were invited to act as chief guest and preside. VII Std. children were made to pay Rs 5 each towards the expenses for the function and monies were also collected from other children with the threat that this was a sieve and only generous contribution would enable them to get through the filter. This not so subtle threat to fail the children in the approaching final examinations enabled the 2 school teachers to collect a considerable sum of money.

On the morning of the School Day, the officials came and disappeared into the house of one of the teacher to feast themselves on whisky and chicken. By the time they came out in the afternoon they were not fit to attend any function, let alone preside. A photographer had been brought in from Bagepalli to take a Group snap of the VII std. children who were passing out of the village's middle school

As is normal whenever a photograph is to be taken in a village, all other children rushed to take their places and to be in the snap. the teachers moved in and threw out all the Harijan kids but allowed caste non VII Std. children to remain. These children went crying to their parents.

It is only at this stage that elder Harijans went to the place. They had earlier decided to boycott the entire function in protest; against the coercive manner in which funds were raised. They approached their Panchayat chairman who was there present and protested strongly against this blatant caste discrimination and said that they would take their complaint to higher officials if nothing was done.

The sozzled officials grasped this excuse the cancel the entire function and return home. The teachers did not protest because they knew what the Harijans could substantiate their charge very easily by exhibiting a copy of the group photograph which showed caste children who were not in the VII Std. but no Harijan child. The Headmaster of the school, a local peasant, agreed with the Harijans that the whole thing had been shamefully conducted from the very beginning and that he was helpless because his teachers and the higher ups were on chummy terms. It was a fact that this headmaster had shown his disapproval throughout, and had not partaken in the ill begotten feast. The incident was more or less forgotten except for some fears that the teachers might retaliate in the coming examinations.

Sathyamurthy and his family left the village the next day, and most of the VLWs left with him to help shift luggage. That afternoon, the police arrived. A complaint had been filed against 30 persons on charges of disturbing the peace. The Harijans held their wits in spite of severe threats and maintained that they had no hands in the abrupt decision of the officials to cancel the function. They reiterated their stand that their children had been discriminated against, and that this was the unlawful act that a complaint should have been lodged against.

The Harijans sent a message to us and by evening we convened a special meeting of the CSU to discuss the entire episode. We found the people quite undisturbed by the fact that Sathyamurthy had left them exposed to the Landlord forces. For them, this did not matter at all.

“It has always been our fight. We thank Sathyamurthy for what he has done for us for 3 long years.”

“What about us?”

“You are a different matter. You at Bagepalli are maintaining our office.

We cannot let the foundation get weak.”

They insisted that they needed another Community Worker though. They reasoned that even if a Community Worker stayed for only few years, they could learn a lot and strengthen their Sangha and unity. After a lot of very useful discussions, we finally came down to the matter at hand. Together we drafted out a counter complaint under the Untouchability Act against the teachers and officials and returned to Bagepalli after visiting the police stations at Pathapalya village.

The very next evening, vigilant Harijans caught one of the teacher red handed, selling Government issued grain for the school mid-day meals programme to a vegetable vendor. The Harijans observing all the prescribed procedures, seized the food grains and cash and locked it away in the Panchayat Office. They all gathered the next day also with a few sympathetic Middle Peasants and drafted a complaint to the police against the teacher.

Shortly, the AEO sent feelers for a compromise, but the Harijans were not for it. Normal activity resumed, and in the examinations none of our children were failed thanks mainly to the Headmaster's integrity. Today, 3 months later, a case has been registered and summons issued to 7 Harijans. No action has been taken by the police on the other 2 cases, exposing their blatant bias. We may prefer a private complaint before the Judicial Magistrate after consulting our lawyer.

This incident, and the manner in which the people conducted themselves in Somnathpura villages showed us that the CSU has really become very mature and is now very much a fabric of the permanent village scene.

### 3.2. Continuity in the Cluster

Soon after Sathyamurthy's departure we held a series of discussions in the villages regarding continuity. Even though we suggested that the VLWs and other cadre together form a committee and manage the programme, the people insisted that a Community Worker's presence was essential. We kept this in abeyance for some time till another development took place.

A few week later, 3 of the 5 VLWs said that they wanted to leave to join Sathyamurthy. The people, as well as our Group were very unhappy with their decision. While we reasoned that personal attachment to Sathyamurthy must have weighed as much as monetary temptation in making them leave, the people were not so generous in their judgement. In their opinion, the Community Worker leaving for an area closer to his native place was understandable, and they had only good feelings towards him for the assistance he had given in initially forming the Coolie Sangha. But the VLWs had no such excuse. They were labourers who had been trusted to take active leadership roles in struggles and had developed these qualities only with a view to be permanently attached to the local CSUs. It must, however, be said in fairness that 2 of the 3 VLWs who left were excellent organisers.

We again discussed matters with the people in the light of this new development and argued that they simply must assume greater responsibilities. Even if we find another Community Worker, we argued, it would take months for him to settle and attune himself to the situation. Shortly, Suryanarayana Reddy a postgraduate joined us on probation. But it will take Suri a long time to adjust to the very special role he has to perform in the Cluster. Many barriers like his caste and fairly affluent background have to first be overcome before he can identify himself completely with the people.

## Coolie Nataka

In order to educate and inform people about the struggles of the labourers against injustices committed in the execution of the Nominal Roll (NR) works programme of the Government, a Group of labourers practiced a simple 40 minutes play called *Coolie Nataka* (labourer's drama) here in Bagepalli.

They got the idea after seeing a leftist touring drama troupe perform in our villages on our invitation. This troupe aims at educating the people in the state about the various struggles and accomplishments of peasants and labourers in Karnataka.

*Coolie Nataka*, in spite of many problems turned out to be just perfect. Our people were invited to perform in Kolar during a *dharna* of the district *Ryot Sangha*.

## NOMINAL ROLL WORKS

In response to the people's demand that the Taluk be declared a drought and famine affected area the Government started massive NR works. Under this scheme, road repairs, tank bund repairs, digging of pits for cattle on tank beds, etc. were taken up and labourers were to be paid Rs 5 per day for men and women alike.

But the Public Works Department (PWD) officials struck bargains with powerful contractors right from the inception of the scheme and rules were bent enabling the contractors to pay according to piece rate – fixed rates for fixed quantities of earth work done - but claim from the PWD against muster-rolls (attendance registers of labourers). The difference was shared by contractors and officials, alike. The contractors on their part, struck bargains with local merchants. Claiming that bills were not passed by the PWD in time, they delayed even these reduced payments to the labourers, but instead arranged credit facilities in selected provision stores in the villages where the labourers were triple cheated in measure, price, as well as quality. Wages, when paid, went directly to these merchants against outstanding dues. The abnormal profits were shared by merchants and contractors alike.

All this lasted for about a month, during which period the labourers were so tired with the drought and their heroic agitations that they were lulled to gratefully accept anything that came. But soon, the Coolies in 3 Clusters – Kondireddipalli Lagumaddepalli, and Yellampalli where the major part of the NR works of the Taluk were going on awoke to the complex cheating and started planning struggles in their Coolies Sangha Units. This took place almost simultaneously in over a dozen villages.

At first, the actions were almost spontaneous, mainly aimed at abolishing the piece work system and introducing the daily wage system as original envisaged in the scheme. In Kondireddipalli the labourers temper was sparked by continuous delay in weekly payments and deterioration in quantity and quality of grain. In Pakapatlapalli area, it was the delay in starting works (each time a very minor work lasting only a few days was granted by the PWD causing many gaps between contracts).

But it was in Yellampalli area, embracing about 6 villages that major action demanding the bypassing of contractors and PWD directly taking up works came up.

More than 300 labourers were engaged in NR works being carried out in 2 places near Yellampalli village. The work conditions almost resembled slave labour because the contractors wanted to retaliate since they were forced to pay the full 8 hours without a minute's rest in order to really earn their wage.

The labourers all protested and about 200 of them struck before the PWD office in Bagepalli demanding that the department directly takes up works. On the second day of their strike, the officials conceded. But it took another demonstration a few days later to actually commence the works because of delay tactics that were being adopted.

The PWD appointed *Maistrys* (supervisors) were no better than contractors in the way they treated the labourers. Soon, it came to light that the maistrys wrote nearly double the names on the attendance registers and faked thumb impressions. In the Coolie Sangha meeting convened to discuss this new development, we explained that the labourers were the ultimate sufferers if this continued. Monies were allotted for say 100 days. With this sort of pilfering, the works would be forced to a standstill in 50 to 60 days. What would the labourers do for the remaining 1½ months till rains came and agriculture offered some labour? Corruption therefore, was not to be accepted as a normal occurrence, saying, “oh, everyone takes bribes!” the labourers could understand this reasoning, and in about a week, they were able to muster enough strength to strike again. The PWD officials tried to retaliate by cancelling the entire NR works in the area. The labourers refused to give back the implements given by the department. In the end, after 3 days, the officials said,

“You don’t want contractors, you don’t want maistrys. Then who is to implement the works?”

“We!” was their reply.

After a lot of haggling, the officials finally decided to give the works directly to the people, under the supervision of their own elected supervisor. Some amount of peace and continuity entered the scene.

Though the Coolies are facing many problems of management and check, etc. the works are still going on reasonably well. Our 6 VLWs and other youth showed terrific organisational and mobilization skills and Nagaraja, our Community Worker was able to give very good guidance. The weekly training sessions that Nagaraja conducts in Yellampalli for his area cadre helped tremendously in analysing various aspects of the problem and stages of their struggle.

## BUREAUCRATIC REACTION TO ORGANISING LABOURERS

Officials of the PWD were quite piqued at the fact that we were organising labourers to force implement the NR works properly. This was quite understandable, considering that they were put to quite a substantial loss of side income from contractors and maistrys. But, not having repressive powers they were able to do little about it except grumble and curse. After some time, when they saw that the labourers legitimate struggle was spreading rapidly they contemplated concrete steps to silence the struggle.

The local PWD official had to explain to their higher-ups as to the reasons for loss of “revenue”. Higher ups were shocked that matters had taken such a serious turn. Their natural and immediate allies were the contractors. The contractors, all being local laundered persons, had sound political contacts in the ruling party. Thereby, they were able to persuade certain ruling party members and elected officials to initiate some action against our group, which was immediately identified as the reason for the labourers consciousness.

These politicians, in their turn, instructed Taluk and district administrative officials to intervene and curb or organisational activities. Though in the district administration there are people who are basically sympathetic to the cause of the poor, it became impossible for them to openly oppose this reactionary move of local politicians.

The police were brought in at this stage in order to enquire into our activities and report. They visited practically all our villages, collecting information from landlords and petty officials, and threatening labourers. They even went to the extent of questioning the wives of our Community Workers and VLWs when their husbands were away at CSU Meetings in other villages, late at night. We refused to be intimidated, claiming it our legal right to educate and help people organise themselves to challenge atrocities committed against them.

Finding nothing illegal in what we were doing, they had to content themselves and their bosses with catching us on petty faults like driving without a valid license, singing our songs too loud, etc. and generally peruse a policy of harassment. A few days back, they filed a case of disturbing the peace against one of our Group members, claiming that he had instigated 80 labourers from the Lagumaddepalli area to come and demand wages for 3 weeks from the PWD, while in actual fact some of these labourers fainted due to hunger when waiting for the arrogant engineer to be persuaded to pay their pending dues. We are certain that this spate of fabricated cases will have to be discharged when they come for hearing before the Court for want of evidence and common sense.

For the labourers, who know all this in actual working detail, and are exposed to platform uttering of leaders on the need to organise labourers and root out corruption (through our newspaper and radio forums in the villages) this is a very effective lesson on the nature of the State.