

## 0112. 9<sup>th</sup> Progress Report (Sep 1985)

*This report covers developments in the Coolie Sangha in the 2½ year period April 1983 to September 1985. As a result of the evaluation of ADATS 5 years work by Jan Neggers and Alex Tuscano we decided to introduce economic projects onto our strategy for mass organisation work with the Coolies. In May 1984, December 1984 and August 1985 we have already reported on the Dairy Development Project and the Coolie Credit Fund. Most importantly, the formal structures of the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha were discussed during these 2½ years.*

In December 1984, 4 of our 5 Community Workers resigned from the Group it was decided not to replace them. In May 1985 the new organizational structure of ADATS and the Coolies of Bagepalli was evolved. A major portion of the responsibilities for planning and implementing the programmes projects and activities was given to the Coolies and their Sangha.

In September 1985 the ADATS Expansion Programme into 60 more villages of the taluk was started. It was decided to promote 10 villages level Workers as Community Workers to work in these new villages of the Expansion programme. As a result, ADATS became staffed for the very first time with Coolies themselves working for Coolie development. In the 10 villages where the Villages Level Workers were removed, it was decided not to replace them and ADATS has withdrawn all staff, operating with elected CSU Representatives, supported by a small technically proficient staff at the Central Office. The remaining 20 VLWs will also be withdrawn by December 1986. In their place, the Coolies will elect CSU September and Cluster Secretaries who will not be paid by ADATS, as has already happened in these 10 villages.

### 1. CADRE TRAINING, BCS, & MANAGEMENT SKILL TRAINING

As soon as the evaluation was completed we re-started the rounds of cadre training which had been interrupted. We shared the observations made by Jan and Alex when giving us a third opinion of our 5 years work, and continued giving the Coolies an in-depth knowledge of societal forces operating.

Since a popular Government of their choice had come into power in Karnataka, the expectation of the Coolies was fairly high. A considerable amount of time was spent during these cadre training in just discussion long pending issues and finding solutions and redresses for grievances.

But efforts to form the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha were not quite as successful as we had expected them to be. Most of the discussions were now-way affairs with us speaking and the Coolies listening politely. When it came to actually starting the monthly BCS meeting there was a definite dragging of feet. Many Coolies attended but did not speak much. When we got tired of speaking and the silence became insufferable, we said that this was supposed to be a meeting & not a training. If there was nothing much to discuss, we suggested, we could disperse. Everyone quickly agreed, had lunch, and went home!

After the initial shock at things not turning out as we had planned and expected, we made a quick recovery. We went to all the villages and conducted fresh elections for CSU Representatives (called Prathinnidhis). The idea of having different Committees in each CSU was abandoned and instead we asked them to elect 3 Representatives per CSU for one year terms which expire every May Day, with the right to recall. We then introduced the system of holding Cluster Meets on fixed days every week, in the mornings, at the central villages. The Project Director and the DDP Extension Worker (now the Executive Assistant) made it a point to

attend each and every Cluster Meet, and these Meets became the forums where a working relationship with ADATS was forged. The pace of Coolie participation in these Cluster Meets quickened and soon it was the elected CSU Representative who were representing the issue and problems of their respective CSUs for discussion. A friction started developing between them and our Community Workers and in Clusters where the Community Workers were not able to adjust fast enough or where they were not able to give an intellectual and analytical leadership, their positions were being threatened. These conflicts became quite open in Billur and Kondireddipalli centres. In Aiavarapalli Cluster the Community Worker openly expressed his resentment against his opinion being questioned and even by-passes by the Coolies in the Cluster Meets.

We were able to contain these resentments by discussing them quite frankly and openly in the Saturday Meetings of The Group. It was recognised that though democratisation, decentralization and participation were noble objects to pursue, they were often difficult to accept in reality. Yet, a consensus agreeing that our leadership must be restricted to offering theoretical and analytical clarity alone, while only those actually from the Coolies class should aspire for and be encouraged to develop organizational leadership, was being arrived at. But this consensus never materialized.

Though Cluster Meets became a regular feature in the Coolie Sangha, we did not stop conceptualising on the legal status and structure of the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha, guaranteeing its continuity even after the organizational withdrawal of ADATS the midwife organization.

After months of discussions with the Representatives and with individual Coolies, and also because of requirements of the Dairy Development Project we started in 1984, the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha was conceived of, with 2 important objectives:

BCS would be the umbrella organization under whose structure the village Units would function.

All the Coolies from the 30 CSUs are to be members of the General Body of the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha. Their 90 elected CSU Representatives form Executive Body. The Governing Body has permanent Members (Trustees).

The Executive Body evaluates and assesses progress, takes decisions, plans ahead, evolves politics, etc. and makes specific recommendations to the Government Body. These recommendations have to be ratified by the Government Body which need not accept any or all such recommendations. But at the same time the Governing Body cannot take decisions on policy or on finance matters without a specific recommendation from the Executive Body. Thereby the Governing Body becomes a watchdog body to ensure checks and controls and the Executive and the Governing Bodies become totally and mutually dependant on each other.

Charts were made, the VLWs and Representatives explained the BCS structure in minute detail and all the Coolies of all 30 CSUs informed. We got back many feed back suggestions which were all incorporated into the final structure (described above). And a final decision was taken to allow BCS to function exactly as described above but without the Coolies actually, legally, becoming members for a 2 year trial period.

Today we find that there is hardly anything in the BCS structure that needs changing. We are going ahead with the registration formalities and feel that the date of formalizing and legalizing the status of the Coolies in the General Body and of the Representatives in the Executive Body can be advanced.

We are optimistic on the BCS because of a very positive development that took place in 1985. It was prompted by the fact that 4 of our Community Workers resigned in December 1984 and ADATS rejected the Group concept, recognizing itself as a midwife organisation with a slightly longer role to work in many villages of the taluk.

The idea of monthly BCS Meetings every first Saturday of the month suddenly caught the imagination of the Coolies. 6 BCS Meeting have been held in 1985 and not even one of them has had the characteristics of a training session where we did all the talking.

Attendance of these BCS Meetings has been steadily increasing. In addition to the 90 elected CSU Representatives from our 30 CSUs and the 30 VLWs who are now designated as CSU secretaries, many other have started coming on a regular basis from villages that ADATS has not even visited! For the 7<sup>th</sup> September 85 BCS Meeting, these uninvited but welcome guests numbered 70! When asked, they say that they have formed CSUs in their villages, are the elected CSU Representatives, and have been asked by their Coolies to go to Bagepalli every first Saturday. Identical structures to what ADATS has developed for the Coolies over the past nearly 8 years are being imitated by the Coolies by themselves, sans Cluster Meets.

A perusal of the Minutes Books of the Cluster Meets and the BCS Meetings gives the answer as to why the BCS suddenly caught the imagination of the Coolies these past months:

“All these days ADATS had its People (the Community Workers) in our villages. They were from middle and rich peasant background and ADATS expected them to work for us Coolies. So we had decided that the Coolie Sangha were not our affairs, but ADATS’. Now these follows have left... today we feel that the Coolie Sangha are ours. ADATS has become realistic. What Bagepalli Coolie Sangha did they think we could build when covering just 30 of the Taluks 200 villages? Now, ADATS is talking about expansion to soon cover the whole taluk. “ADATS is their organisation. The Coolie Sangha is ours. Let us have a marriage.”

The decision to not replace the resigned Community Workers and to hand over all responsibilities of decision making, supervision, etc. to the Coolie Sangha structures –the CSUs, the Cluster Meets, and the BCS –has tremendously helped develop a confidence in the Coolies that we are serious and mean business. Also having elected CSU Secretaries and Cluster Secretaries to note the minutes, etc. etc. even though in most cases these are our VLWs. But the Coolies have been wise to not appoint the non-Coolies VLWs as Secretaries of their CSUs or Clusters.

In 10 CSUs, we have withdrawn even the VLWs and re-appointed them as Community Workers to work in the new villages of the Expansion programme. The most important consideration when doing this was whether the Coolies and their Representatives themselves felt confident of handling their CSUs without any –body from ADATS. Here again, ADATS has been able to beat the deadline of withdrawal by more than a year –it had been originally envisaged that the CSUs would be in such a state of maturity only by December 1985.

Though all these Community Workers and VLW withdrawal has meant a slight increase in the number of support staff like Extension Workers and Desk Workers in the Central office, we believe that this is not quite the same in terms of Coolie participation in running the programme.

Now that we have introduced economic projects into our work, the Coolies surely need support from technical and managerial expertise staff. But these services should not be exclusive and alienating. That is why, in the DDP for example, we insisted that one of the important functions of our Veterinarian would be to train para-veterinary workers or “bare foot vests”. We have also sent all the Coolies in villages where crossbred cows are given for managerial training to Government farms at Hassaraghatta and our central dairy at Bagepalli. This skill training has been emphasised these past 2½ years.

All the Central Office support staff like the Extension Workers and Desk Workers have been made to understand the importance of this practical skill training for the Coolies. Coolies have been involved in just about any and very activity that they can be involved in. in the last weeks of 1984 it was they who arranged tuition for the children getting ready for their annual

examination, they arranged a children's festival at Bagepalli, got clothes stitched for all the program children, etc.

But we realise that there are certain functions that are beyond the capacity of even neo-literate Coolies. Even then the control charts, planners, ledgers, systems etc. should not be alienating for them. therefore we have started inviting the Representatives in small batches for a week at a time to just be in the office and familiarise themselves. The Accounts Admn. Assistant has taken The responsibility to thus acquaint/ train the Coolies in this manner.

But the most important skill training we have imparted ha not been through either formal or informal classes:

- ❖ In Nakkalapalli and Somnathpura CSUs the Coolies were encouraged to build their own Janata House by taking working capital loans from the Bank to build 4 and 7 houses respectively. Normally the Government builds these houses free of cost for the poor using Contractors cuts and bettering quality, these 2 small economic projects have imparted a lot of construction and money management skills in the Representatives of these 2 villages. Today these CSUs are talking about demanding more Government contracts to be given to their CSUs instead of to Contractors. Some months back these same Coolies would not have dared to think that it was in their capacity to execute construction works by themselves.
- ❖ In Nagarlu CSU a persistent struggle with Canara Bank eventually resulted in 4 low-interest, long term, house loans being sanctioned to 4 Coolies on the CSU security. The elected CSU Representatives of Nagarlu are executing the work very much to the Bank's satisfaction. Once again Nagarlu is a village where the Coolies did not dream that they possessed such capacities.
- ❖ In the Somnathpura Cluster where we have given nearly 30 crossbred cows under the DDP in 3 villages, where is no Government Milk Collection Society. So the Coolies are by themselves running a Mild Collection Centre. Coolies who are illiterate in even basic numeracy are now maintaining accounts of mild collected in decimal points, keeping a records of expenses incurred, dividing monthly expenses against the total quantity of milk collected, and charging it to each person who uses the facility to sell his milk, based on the quantity of milk poured to the Centre in the month!
- ❖ The other day, when asked how illiterates who were so diffident about every aspect of life just a few years back were doing all this for over 1½ years now, even they were surprised! Today there is talk of the Government starting a Milk Collection Society at Somnathpura. There is a fair chance of the Coolies capturing this Society in the ensuing elections and the *Ryots* will now oppose them.
- ❖ The accounts of the Coolie Credit Fund, though fairly simple are being maintained by the Coolies themselves. Only a Master Cash Book and Kardex ledgers are maintained at our Central Office. Once again the Coolies have found a solution to overcome their illiteracy –they use their children who are going to school through our children's programme to do the actual writing and trust their truly phenomenal memory for the rest!

The Coolies welcome this change from training in classrooms to training through actually executing small economic projects by themselves. But they are also quick to point our that unless they have had the political cadre training imparted all these years, this what is being done now would have no value:

- ❖ "If we can run our own village CCF and the Cluster CCF, all we need to do is understand how the office CCF works for the whole taluk. Then we can even take over and manage Canara Bank!"
- ❖ "What's so great in the Contractors? They have working capital in one pocket and a few tricks in another. We too have the working capital in our CCFs. All we need to do now is learn a few tricks!"
- ❖ "Before we might have had the political clout to capture our village Societies (of the Government). But afterwards we would not have known how to run it and make sure that the sugar and kerosene oil come... now we don't think it will be too different from our Milk Collection Centre!"

The one Community Worker who did not resign is today the Field Worker of ADATS. He is in charge of Coolie participation and training. He attends all The Cluster Meets, organizes

political as well as practical training and ensures that they will be in a position to manage all the programmes of ADATS by themselves in the shortest time possible.

## 2. INDIVIDUAL SELF SUFFICIENCY PLANS:

At the end of the evaluation by Jan and Alex, we made an Extension Application to NOVIB for a further 3 years support till December 1986. In it we had also asked for 3 years salaries and stipends in advance so that we could all set up small dairy units and try and earn our own living. This was because at the time we had not considered a longer life beyond 1986 for ADATS as an organisation, but believed that we were all personally committed to live on in Bagepalli taluk and find a role for ourselves as intellectual friends of the Coolies.

Though NOVIB was sympathetic to the reasons for this peculiar request, it was not possible for them to give 3 years salary and stipend monies in advance due to certain restrictions they had on the matter. ADATS, however, managed to pay all its Community Workers and VLWs: 2 year salaries and stipends and also arranged Bank loans so that the self sufficiency plans could go ahead.

4 Community Workers and 18 VLWs availed this facility and bought cross-bred cows after training themselves on the practical aspects of management, breeding, etc. at our central dairy and also at the Government farm at Hassaraghatta. Of these, 3 cows died on the next months due to the dreaded Theilerai disease. But the morale was still high since the insurance Company promptly managed the losses. Another 8 more cows were subsequently given to the VLWs under the DDP through the bank. The too proven to be fairly viable.

Except for one VLW who had to suddenly sell his cow because of the major domestic problem all these cows proved to be good sources of income. They did not cause any undue jealousy or problems in the villages because everyone saw the considerable amount of personal labour involved in their maintenance. In fact, these first cows served a very practical demonstration role in encouraging the Coolie to avail the facilities of the DDP and break the myth that crossbred cow maintenance was too complicated for Coolies to manage.

Yet, when the 4 Community Workers resigned all of a sudden in December 1984 they cited being trapped into the self-sufficiency plan as one of the reasons for their resignation. Subsequently ADATS had some problems in recovering the advance given to them for setting up these dairies and could do so only because of solid Coolie pressure.

This fairly short lived experiment at personal self-sufficiency was reviewed by the ADATS Governing Body. They satisfied themselves that even if the scheme are viable and worked, the risks involved are too high. As a result, we were asked to stop making salary advances for such purposes.

On the other hand the Government Body did not see the stipend advance paid to the VLWs as a problem, along as some point of control was maintained to ensure that they continued to do their work properly. Basically, the VLWs are all neo-literate Coolies from the very same villages where they make it easier to attain the independence needed for ADATS' organizational withdrawal from their respective villages. At the same time it was pointed out that having just one or 2 cows per VLW did not ensure levels of income required for them to maintain themselves and also work free of encumbrances.

## 3. FUND RAISING

Along with the Coolies, ADATS planned 6 Collective Production Units (Coconut Farms) to be set-up one in each Cluster. This was done in order to:

So that the Coolies will be able to generate their own fund as to cover the expenses of their struggles, educational, organizational and service activities,

To set up these CPUs in such a manner that will necessitate the Coolies to meet, discuss, take decisions and manage them jointly; the coconut farms should serve as rallying points to further foster their unity and capacity for planned activities and programmes.

To create a structure into which the CPUs will get integrated ensuring their continuity, both, as entities generating funds for the CSUs as well as in style of functioning and grassroots control.

When arguing for the CPU Coconut Farms, we had said:

“Collective ventures aimed at increasing family incomes and at generating employment opportunities will not, we are convinced, succeed. We have elaborated earlier that social, economic and political realities of today’s society are opposed to the collectivisation of their private property, even if the returns from such ventures are slightly higher than their present level of earnings.”

Then, we clarified:

“Our present proposal to set up CPUs to generate funds to support the struggle of the Coolies for their humanization and liberation from exploitative and oppressive forces should not mixed up with the other collective venture that we had commented on, aimed at increasing earning capacities of individual Coolies. These CPUs aim at generating funds for the organization owned, managed and controlled by the Coolies at village, Cluster and taluk level.”

The planning for these CPUs started in early 1984 when we started discussing the question of fund raising with the Coolies in their weekly CSU and Cluster Meetings. The formation of BCS was also discussed side by side, as the organisation which would own, manage and control these CPUs. In the villages with the Dairy Development Project, the effort to increase individual earnings of Coolies was readily saw that the DDP had been, right from the Start, under their control and management.

The selection of Coconut Farms as a suitable venture was not a result of our search, but a discovery of the Coolies themselves. Our only role was to collect diverse opinions and information from one end of the Taluk to the other, initiate fresh discussion on objections, observations and concerns raised in different villages, and finally arrive at acceptable consensus on each minute detail. This proposal was the result of a long, drawn out, grassroots planning exercise.

NOVIB, the Netherlands, expressed an interest in supporting this proposal but a legal complication crept in. according to the Karnataka Land Reforms Act, 1961, charitable societies were barred from purchasing agricultural lands after 1974. We are now in the final process of finding a solution to overcome this hurdle by getting a special exemption from the Government. The Coolies are, in the meantime, understandably disappointed at the delay.

But ADATS greatest triumph in fund raising, when all other bodies in the taluk failed, was to come on 21 September 1985. We had said earlier:

“The generation and management of their own monies, however meagre the amount, in order to finance their mass organisation without this leading to in –fighting, petty squabbles and politicking would be the ultimate test of unity and he Coolies’ organizational maturity.”

The Coolies showed this organizational maturity with a vengeance the other day!

#### 4. COOLIE PANDAGA

On September 1985, in the height of the drought, over 2,500 Coolies representing 1,043 Member Coolie families from 29 CSUs came to Somnathpura village to celebrate, of the first time in the history of this district, a Coolies festival.

The Kothakota Coolies hired 2 vans. The Aachepalli Coolies chartered buses. 200 Coolies from the Billur Cluster marched 20 kilometres shouting slogans and holding banners. Some came in bullock carts...

In the heat of the drought, with a near total failure of the monsoon, 1,043 Coolies had contributed Rs 5 each to finance this, their festival. ADATS was, in effect, invited to the pandaga by the elected Coolie Representatives. The Coolies of Somnathpura Cluster who hosted this unique historical event were the only ones who were 100% sure of bringing this about. Everyone else was justifiably sceptical.

Each CSU presented an "item". Some a small skit, some a dance, there was an inter-Cluster kabaddi match (which never got over) and the backdrop was provided by 3 tribal CSUs doing their traditional Kollattam dance in colourful mirrored dresses. *Mana Patalu* revolutionary songs and traditional Coolies folk lore blared on the mike sets while the Coolies mingled with each other acquainting themselves to events and struggles of distant CSUs. The entire atmosphere was one of pure joy!

500 kgs of rice was cooked. *Sambar* (thick, with plenty of vegetables and *dhal* – the way you fellows make it, the cock was ordered), boiled in 7 huge vessels, and a *Payasam* of jaggery, wheat and *dhal* just flowed. The Somnathpura Coolies had slogged day and night for a week to ensure that everything was organised properly. Water had been collected for 3 days, there was not a single stone or husk in the rice, firewood collected, the eating place cordoned off to set 400 at a time, vessels hired, a Brahmin cook hired for the day, etc. and not a single "experienced" *Ryot* was allowed to interfere!

The Jelipigaripalli Coolies had practiced a conventional drama "*Ramanjaya Yuddham*" for 4 months without a single caste youth in the cast. This extremely precise musical opera was performed for 6 hours from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. Expert critics rated it as the near perfect diction of the shudhras!

The stage, lighting, sounds system and costumes for the all night long drama were hired from a city for Rs 1,550. Over 6,000 people attended the drama on the night of 21 and 22 September 1985.

The Cluster Reports read out by the Cluster Secretaries were received with great awe from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. when the nearly 8 year struggle to build up Coolie Sangha in different villages were narrated. When it was my turn to speak, I was choked with emotion:

"7½ years back when I first came to Somnathpura, an old Harijan named Palaka Earappa invited me into the Harijan Colony saying, 'my people keep on saying that they are incapable of doing anything. Please do something to change this!'. Today, you Coolies have achieved something that is going to go down in the history of this taluk. In the history of this district. Palaka Erappa is no more with us. But his wife and child are some where in this gathering. The dream and the vision of that great man has been fulfilled. If I have been instrumental in this, I feel so very satisfied.

"But what gives me the greatest joy is the fact that all of you have come. Because I know that no now women, not one man, and not one child sitting here feels that I or my friends in ADATS have achieved this. I know that when you get up to return to your villages by the early light of tomorrow's dawn, you will all feel that YOU have achieved this incredible Coolie Pandaga!

"My one and only wish is that this happens every year at a different village. On the 1<sup>st</sup>. of this month, ADATS has expanded to work in 60 more villages of this taluk. Today over 2,000 Coolies have come. My wish is that next year the Member will cross 6,000 and continue to grow!"

It was truly incredible that there was not a single hitch in the entire festival. Normally, even a well planned marriage ceremony with just a few hundred guests turns sour at some points or the other. But here was huge, unique festival organised by the Coolies themselves without a single *Ryot* to help them (and none invited to even attend!) that went flawless to every body's satisfaction. The 3,000 *Ryots* who joined the drama audience uninvited were too awestruck to even notice the not so good performance of our Coolies actors!

When the entire stage and food bills started coming in the next day, we found a sizeable deficit. ADATS very willingly cleared this debt on behalf of the Coolies.

Reactions to the phenomenal success of the Coolie Pandaga are still to come in, for the moment, the taluk is too numbed with the shock of its success. No *Ryot* leader had ever imagined this possible by anyone, let alone by Coolies. For the Coolies as a class, this has been the one most significant event of their history.

## 5. ISSUES AND STRUGGLES

In the past 2½ years, the Coolies have been taking up issues and struggling against exploitative and oppressive forces throughout. The change in Government after the January 1983 elections has democratised the State Apparatus to a very considerable extent. The police are no more the dreaded terror that they used to be. Officials do not move with impunity. Ostentatious displays of political power is absent. The very fragile majority of the ruling Janata party ensures all this. But this very same fragile majority coupled with their basic capitalistic ideology prevents them from becoming too populist in their measures. It also prevents them from taking any radical steps to eradicate disparities. By their own admission of the other day, the guild between the urbanites and the rural poor is widening to dangerous, unbridgeable spans.

While aspirations of the Coolies steadily on the rise, there is very little that is or can be done to satisfy this increased expectation. The work of ADATS only aggravates this situation, but within perfectly legal and law abiding parameters. This does not make us particularly popular with either the ruling party, the bureaucracy, or the *Ryots*. Due to our critical two-peasant approach and working with the 3 principles of political unity, social neutrality and economic contradiction between the Coolie and *Ryot* classes, we do not fit favour in the ranks of the organised Left either. It is, in fact, our intellectual commitment along with the native wisdom of the Coolies that accounts for our continued, unwelcome alliance with the losses Left opposition in the taluk. And the fact this opposition is no more an opposition, but an ally of the ruling front in Karnataka makes it increasingly more tempting to claim an apolitical perspective ; a stance which we know to be dangerous, counter-productive and useless in the long run.

It is in this backdrop of forces of intellectual corruption and seductive easy way outs that ADATS has continued its work for the past 2½ years, making our work all the more difficult and painstaking. We have had to continually counsel the Coolies and clarify phenomena that they know to be true but don't know how.

Having economic projects of implement, targets to reach and services to deliver promptly and efficiently took its toll very heavily in terms of time and energy. Emphasizing on academics to try an attain a class-by standard learning level in our 454 Coolie children in 22 villages took its share. And introducing the new organizational structure of ADATS and the Coolies of Bagepalli taluk, formalising the membership, meeting, minuting and procedures of the CSU Meetings Cluster Meets and BCS Meeting was a Herculean task we took upon ourselves.

The handing over of increased responsibilities to the Coolies was thrust upon us by the untimely resignation of the 4 Community Workers. Following through The grassroots planning

exercise with the initiation of the Coolie Credit Funds in the villages with a negative band balance and establishing it as an alternate credit system in the villages could never have been done without the support of unconditional friends who thought us mad but still supported. And we stuck with stubborn determination to our target dates for organizational withdrawal from 10 villages and the starting of the Expansion Program into 60 more villages.

For all this, we are sincerely grateful to the 1,043 Member Coolie families of 29 CSUs who alone fully recognised the propitious moment and shared our zeal. We also wish to record our deep and profound gratitude to the Coolies for the grand finale of comradeship, trust and affection they showed us in successfully having celebrated the Coolies Pandaga.

### 5.1. Jelipigaripalli wage strike

The CSU at Jelipigaripalli has a strength of about 45 families. The prevailing wage in the area was either Rs 3 or 2 measures of grain. In early 1984 all the *Ryots* conceived a plan. They pooled all the reserve grain in the house of the village elder and declared it to be a shop. They pleaded their inability to pay wages in kind saying that they had no grain. Using the perpetual drought as an excuse.

The next days, Jelipigaripalli Coolies took their daily wages of Rs 3 to the one and only newly created grain shop in the village. To their astonishment they found that the monopoly price of grain had gone up to Rs 2 per measure and that their wages had been reduced, in real terms, to 1½ measures. When they protested, the *Ryots* shammed their inability to do anything about this.

After a week's hectic meetings and discussions, against every odd, the Jelipigaripalli wage strike was started. This is a struggle that will go down in the history of the taluk as one of the longest, toughest struggles yet undertaken by anyone in the taluk.

Very soon the strike led to the Coolies being socially boycotted in the village; the strikers' strength reduced to 23 Coolie families; the police intervened to threaten them but extreme maturity and level headedness on the part of the CSU Representatives converted this intervention to their favour; the labour inspector intervened lukewarmly on the Coolies' behalf; the local MLA visited the villages, was unable to convince the *Ryots* who were his followers of 35 years and made a historical break with them, pleading his inability to do anything but encouraging the Coolies to continue the strike; local left peasant leader assembled at Jelipigaripalli to break the strike but once again the CSU Representative managed to change their positions; the Janata Government was asked to intervene but the MLA clarified the issue at the highest level; the local Congress-I refused to take sides; the strike continued.

In terms of sheer suffering, the Coolies of Jelipigaripalli went through hell. Only in the most acute stage when labour was just not available in the surrounding villages, roots exhausted, that ADATS helped the strikers with 3 bags of rice and Rs 1,000 to start their own petty shop (which got pauperised very soon). After one full year, the *Ryots* gave up. When they agreed to pay Rs 4 or 2 measures of grain as daily wages, the Coolies refused to accept and demanded Rs 5 in cash alone. The strike continued for another week before the *Ryots* accepted total, complete defeat.

In the meantime, the Jelipigaripalli Coolies established a rapport with Coolies and decent *Ryots* of about 25 surrounding villages and laid the foundation for the ADATS Expansion program into 60 more villages. They practiced the famous drama which was enacted on the night of 21 and 22 September during the Coolie Pandaga. They conducted cadre training for Coolies of surrounding villages. They helped us set up the new organizational structure of the Coolie Sangha. They enrolled many non Harijans from Jelipigaripalli into the CSU, on the explicit advice of the MLA they went around settling inter-Coolie disputes in the surrounding villages. In short, literally on empty stomachs, more than 20 Coolie families, men as well as

women, did solid mass organisation work in the area. In every villages they visited, they were received with warmth and fed. But most importantly, they taught us at ADATS the meaning of struggle.

The other day, I took a friend of ours to visit the Coolies of Jelipigaripalli. We were speaking in tillage when I told the visitors that their struggle lasted a year. An elderly Harijan, Pedda Gangulappa, retorted; "What one Year? You know nothing about strikes! A strike lasted for ever, it is a way of life."

### 5.2. Kothakota Teacher

When the school year started in 1985, 52 school going Coolie children were supplied with note books under our children's program. The text books were to be supplied by the school teachers as part of the new scheme introduced by the Janata Government. But the teacher at the Kothakota Government School demanded a bribe of one 200 page note book per child in order to give the Marks Card of the previous exams and the text books. The parents of these 52 children and the CSU Representatives tried to persuade the teacher to desist, but he acted very handed and arrogant. The CSU decided to get him punished as an example to all corrupt teachers. Their many representations to the taluk authorities were treated with contempt. Finally they all collected the fare and travel expenses and sent a delegation to Bangalore to meet with the Education Minister. He promised immediate action and they returned.

The Coolies waited for some more days but nothing happened. They intensified their agitation at Bagepalli, made the children boycott classes, and finally got the teacher transferred. The Kothakota Coolies followed this up by relating this teacher's antecedents to the villagers of his new posting and got them to represent that they did not want him. Today, this teacher has been posted as a clerk in the taluk education office, but the officer is not prepared to accept him.

### 5.3. Venkatappanaikanakunta

To the north of Nagarlu Village is a rain fed tank that has traditionally been used for watering cattle, sheep and goats the Bund of this and breached and the PWD engineers promptly made an estimate and plan to repair it. but for 2 years this work was postponed because of pressure from a feudal Landlord of another village who had begun cultivating the fertile alluvial silt of the tank bed.

When pressed to act, the PWD claimed that the Nagarlu Coolies went to the MLA and got the work sanctioned. They personally worked on the breach repair work and set the tank right once again. In the meantime, many cattle had perished for want of drinking water the previous year.

### 5.4. Billur Gram Sabha

As part of the populist loan giving spree, the central and state Governments have introduced the IRDP and Anthyodaya schemes to give heavily subsidized, low interest loans to the rural poor. In order to select the beneficiaries, Gram Sabha are to be held at each Cluster village. The Village Secretary is supposed to inform the date of the Gram Sabha to all the people well in advance so that they could all together identify beneficiaries before the Government officials.

As is the case normally, this procedure was short-circuited and a sham Gram Sabha was held at Billur. When we went to extend their weekly Cluster Meet, the Coolies told us that deserving people had not been given loans, that their CSU Representatives were not allowed to speak, etc.

We gave a thorough hearing to what they had to say and then asked what we could do. They had no answer. Then, we said:

“We are actually glad that this has happened. The reason why so many of the Gram Sabha, including yours, area sham is because you fellows do not know how to speak, what to speak. You see a Government official and you tremble! You lose your tongues! How can you know your rights and responsibilities in a meeting you are invited when you have never attended a meeting of any sort in your lives? This is the very first Cluster Meet where we find such a packed attendance, and that is because your hearts are burning that you did not get those loans. If you attend these Coolie Sangha meetings, then you will know the procedure and how to present your point of view in any other meeting. Otherwise, stay as goats and sheep!

Till that day in early 1985 Billur showed no promise as a Cluster with a strong Coolie Sangha movement. But this firing irked them into action...

The gram Sabha was re-convened after a long struggle involving many representations and a long march to Bagepalli. It was held at everyone's satisfaction. And nowadays the Coolie Sangha meetings are better attended.

### 5.5. Other Struggles

We are reporting only 4 typical struggles taken up by the Coolies in the past 2½ years. Jelipigaripalli has not been the only wage strike. It is not only in Kothakota or in Nagarlu that erring officials or vulgar Landlords have been put in place. But it is not possible to narrate all the struggles, big and small, that the Coolies have undertaken in the past 30 months. Each and every one of them has contributed to furthering the organizational strength and maturity of the Coolies at their CSU and Cluster levels.

Taluk level issues have been studiously avoided and the Coolie Pandaga was the first major shoe of strength they dared to venture. No amount of persuasion has convinced them that they do have the strength to take up general taluk level issues of wages and corruption. Perhaps the Coolies are better than us in gauging opportune moments.

The transfer of power from ADATS staff and Group members who were essentially from non-Coolies class backgrounds to illiterate and neo-literate Coolies has not been without confusion and conflicts. The culture of poverty and the need to be subjugated, commanded to and ordered has been internalised in a large majority of the Coolies, to the extent of often wishing to not have decision making powers, not want responsibilities, and to prefer to deal with a greater, richer, father figure than to a gathering of equals.

I, personally, have had to continually impress upon the Coolies that I do not desire to develop individual relationships with any Coolies at a personal level; that I do not wish to profit with popularity or a good name. And this has been very difficult for me. Because the breaching of traditional patron-Client relationships causes deep hurt and a sense of betrayal. We have lost some very sincere Coolies in the process, and this has caused me torturous sleepless nights. I confess having often wondered if we were in the right path; whether democratic structures, values and norms did in fact have the solution at all. Whether we had the right to snatch away the comfort that dependencies brought to the alienated poor. The total shock, surprise and disbelief at what we have been doing in the older Coolies who are certainly not going to be able to understand in spite of umpteen training sessions and convincing is pathetic to see. These are the turmoil of change, and I have understood and shared this pain with the Coolies.

In each CSU is a creative minority. Sometimes it is the Representatives. Sometimes it is, unexpectedly, a wise old man like the late Palaka Earappa of Somnathpura. They are the ones who dare to visualize and shed the comfortable cocoons that exploitative feudal relations spin.

They are the ones who are the vanguards of true democracy. And they are the ones who prevent people like me from searching for excuses to put off necessary and healthy developments like organizational withdrawal. The strikers of Jelipigaripalli are a good example of these heroes.

Others, including the 4 Community Workers who resigned from ADATS 10 months back have been making capital organisation this confusion and conflicts, making the work of the VLWs and the elected Coolie Representatives extremely difficult. They have been the profits of doom at times, spreading malicious rumours at other times, and generally sowing divisive seeds always. It is difficult to pass judgements on the victims of their malice and dub them simplistically as opportunistic or greedy or untrustworthy or whatever.

The Yellampalli CSU and Maravapalli CSU are good examples. 83 Coolies families of Yellampalli have been ostracized by the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha for having acted very shabbily during the past difficult 10 months. The 40 odd tribal Coolie families of Maravapalli Thanda have had all ADATS benefits like the children's programme, CCF, etc. cut off largely by their own making. In both villages the Coolies have been victims of malicious manipulation by the 4 Community Workers who left us and chose to work against ADATS and the Coolie Sangha.

These are not black and white problems and so the solutions have to be found in shades of grey.