

## 0508. Attempt to enter Mandal Panchayats (7 May 1987)

*A highly personalised and touching essay by Ram Esteves on the heroic attempt made by the Coolies of Bagepalli taluk to contest and capture Mandal Panchayat elections – their dreams, visions, thrill and exhilaration during a highly charged campaign, a child like disappointment due to their electoral naivety, and the bitter after-taste that residues after any dirty campaign...*

*The essay ends with a reflection on the real place of electoral struggle in an empowerment strategy.*

### I

Empowering Coolies entails enabling them to enter into the civil structures (local bodies) that control village life. The Coolie Sangha Model of Development is unambiguous on this point when it talks about societal relevance through geo-political viability. At the same time, the Model is emphatic on the assertion that seizing power is not within the purview of the Coolie Sangha; that the Model is, in this sense, apolitical.

Political parties constantly strive to enter into all structures that control village life – civic as well as state. They attempt to etch a place for themselves in as large a constituency as possible. Seizing power is their obvious and evident intent.

What then is the strategic difference, in political practice, between the Coolie Sangha and the Political Party? The difference that, when enunciated, clearly defines the relationship between the Coolie Sangha and the Political Party?

A statement on this relationship was initially drafted, but then omitted from the final paper on the Coolie Sangha Model of Development (March 1986) because of the over specificity the draft laid to ADATS and the particular situation in Bagepalli taluk; to the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA which represents only one among the many oppressed classes in village society and a particular Political Party which, in its manifesto, is entrusted with carrying all the oppressed classes together in a struggle for liberating the whole of society.

The situation in Bagepalli taluk has since changed. The polarisation of forces in the body politic of the taluk has led to a picture closely resembling the general situations in Karnataka, indeed in South India. Contemporary political struggles of the Coolies in Bagepalli taluk now have a learning value for others since they are replicable.

An attempt was made by the Coolies of Bagepalli to enter into the newly created Mandal Panchayats. To give a brief and abbreviated version of this attempt would be to do injustice to the tremendous learning material that this political struggle provided. It all went beyond a quest for empowerment laying bare the subtle and delicate equilibrium that is the relationship between the Voluntary Agency and the Mass Organisation. The whole concept behind the 2 Organisations strategy followed by development workers can be better understood by making a study of what happened in Bagepalli. ADATS has tried to analyse this political struggle of the Coolies and the role we ourselves played, in an attempt to answer the above questions. We document, in this Report, both these attempts.

### II

After having worked for 8 years and evolved an applicable model for Coolie development, elected CSU Representatives and elected Cluster Secretaries could handle the Coolie Sangha Units and ADATS programmes by themselves. ADATS went into the Chelur Expansion Programme (CEP) in September 1985. 10 Village Level Workers (VLWs) were withdrawn from the older villages and set up Pathapalya and Chelur Hoblis as Community Workers.

After an initial socio political survey of over 60 villages, the Community Workers identified the Central Villages where they began to live in from December 1985.

Volunteers (who later became ADATS paid VLWs) were identified from the surrounding villages and an adult literacy programme was started for 1,470 voluntary learners in 49 villages. Specially prepared material, designed to increase the socio-political consciousness of Coolies and at the same time make them quickly literate, was used in these night classes. Coupled with descriptive folk songs, weekly and minuted CSU Meetings, CSU Representatives, weekly Cluster Meets, issue as and struggles a deep seated political aspiration to be rid of feudal humiliation began to be instigated in 1,678 provisional Member Coolies from 52 budding CSUs.

All these developments occurred in early 1986, in a milieu of severe threats and harassment from the local village leaders. Our community Workers and VLWs were intimidated and the provisional Member Coolies put to great hardships. Hand loans were refused, access to credit facilities closed, socially they were boycotted, cattle grazers beaten and Coolie women molested. No Political Party gave their open consent to this village level repression till the CPI(M) made a sudden *volte face*, dubbed us as agents of a foreign agency, declared their intention to prevent us from working anywhere in the taluk, and gave open encouragement and political leadership to all anti-ADATS forces in the CEP villages. Simultaneously, they began to revive the *Ryot Sangha* in the villages, and very soon the CPI(M)'s anti-ADATS stand became an anti-Coolie Sangha stand.

These sudden developments took us by surprise. We thought that this was only a temporary aberration in our relationship and attributed it to a change in leadership since a young and inexperienced person from a neighbouring taluk had come to lead the Party in Bagepalli. But this was not so. The CPI(M), at a national level, began to see the convenient bogey of a foreign hand and voluntary agencies behind each electoral defeat they suffered and each political setback they experienced, all over the country. The new stand taken by the taluk CPI(M) accurately reflected the Party's official position at an all-India level.

In the meantime, an unprecedented drought was ravaging Karnataka in 1986 due to a near total failure of rains in the preceding year. We were, in the 26 older villages, implementing a grass root planned and CSU controlled Drought Relief Works that gave employment to each and every Member Coolie during the 6 summer months from March to August. The implementation of this DRW project sapped all our organisational time and energy.

In spite of massive migration of upto 90% of the men folk, severe harassment, and a totally disproportionate ADATS attention to such a large and new venture, the CEP Community Workers and Village Level Workers did an admirable job of Coolie Sangha formation in the 52 new villages of Pathapalya and Chelur Hoblis. The only support we gave them was in the form of suggestions and moral encouragement in the fortnightly CEP Meetings. Yet, their morale never sagged.

By mid 1986, however, it became apparent that they had stretched their capacities to the limit and there was an urgent need to intervene and strengthen the hands of the CEP Community Workers and Village Level Workers. Partly because we were hard pressed for time and partly because of the urgency in covering the whole of the CEP area as quickly as possible, an entirely new approach was taken. All the provisional Member Coolies of a Cluster were requested to convene a "public meeting" at the Central Village where the Community Worker lived.

These "public meetings" without stages, platforms, chairs or loud speakers, started at 8 p.m. and went on till well past midnight. They were attended by hundreds of Coolie men, women and children. In 10 days time, we had repeated the same reassurances and kindled the same craving for human dignity and basic rights in over 3,000 Coolies from 52 villages. We of-

ferred no concrete solutions. Nor did we alleviate their sufferings in any way. We gave them hope and no assurance of support. A feeling of warmth, trust, respect and deep affection spontaneously blossomed. Each subsequent “public meetings” was more intense than the earlier; each declaration of solidarity more powerful than the previous; each speech more enthusiastic with a firm determination to achieve than all the preceding. They were thrilly and exuberant days for us, and the same excitement anticipates a “public meeting” to this day!

The content of the message was simple and irrefutable. That Coolies had an inalienable right as humans and that ADATS would stand by them in all actions that were just and legal to ascertain this right; an extending of a hand that was readily grabbed by thousands of Coolies who were defied, and therefore dared dream – dreams that could and would come true!

The object of these “public meetings” was to create a myth of strength. We call it myth because it was not reality. Coolie Sanghas were not yet formed in the CEP area. The strength of the Coolie class lay in its numbers, but these numbers were not yet an organised and disciplined force, strong enough to defend its class interests. At the same time, the CPI(M) leadership was offering a direction to the *Ryot* Class in their attack against the Coolies. It was vital, at that point, to offer an alternate leadership to the Coolies who would otherwise have got cowed down into submission and their just kindled aspirations would have been snuffed out. The object of these “public meetings” was to strengthen the efforts made by the CEP Community Workers and VLWs.

The inherent weakness, however, was that these “public meetings” tended to reduce individual Coolies to a common class denominator in the mass. This was inevitable in gatherings so large and meetings so short. At that time, however, we did not pay much heed to this drawback since we felt that we were just providing a leadership figure, the personality of ADATS, for the Coolies to rally around in their struggle for humanisation. That these “public meetings” did not provide us with an opportunity to get to know and relate to individual Coolies did not particularly worry us.

In those Clusters where the Community Workers followed up these “public meetings” with a further intensified effort to introduce more lasting and enduring strength for the Coolies through better attended CSU Meetings and Cluster Meets, further cadre training, better enforced self discipline, etc. the result was very good. Village leader’s harassment came to a halt and divisive forces failed. But in a few Clusters where the Community Workers and VLWs were complacent and did not follow up with a reinforcing effort, these weaknesses surfaced very quickly.

The CEP area, where all this happened in mid 1986, is a continuous and relatively compact area, only 25 kms long and 20 kms wide. The intensity of the effort gave an inner drive and potential to both, Coolies as well as ADATS, to dream of accomplishments never dreamt before. The hope of the Coolies combined with the removing of inhibitions and limitations long held sacrosanct by us as Voluntary Agencies to create a new euphoria. In most Clusters, this euphoria along with a systematic follow up gave the Coolies an instant strength and bargaining power. They became better equipped to deal with the local *Ryots* as equals. At that time we did not recognise that this same euphoria could become dangerous, replacing a proven strategy with an adventurism.

### III

In 1983, when the Janata Party came to power in Karnataka they promised to introduce a truly decentralised Panchayat Raj system in the villages. They felt that development could not be separated from democracy, and that unless the people participated in the planning and implementation of various rural development schemes, these would not achieve their stated objectives. The system they proposed was Mandal Panchayats for Clusters of about 20 villages,

district level Zilla Parishats and at a later date, *Nyaya Panchayats* attached to each Mandal to try petty offences and democratise the delivery of justice. The Janata Party, due on its own class characteristic and limitation was unable to recognise that there were *Ryots* as well as *Coolies* in the villages; that the countryside did not have a united and homogeneous “people”. Many intellectuals were quick to point out that the proposed Karnataka Zilla Parishats, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and *Nyaya Panchayats* Act, 1983, would only strengthen the hands of the rural elite. It would give a legal sanction and official status for their acts of feudal repression since they were sure to capture all these grassroots bodies. Many bureaucrats subscribed to this view and added that the rural poor were better off under their discretion since they were a disinterested class in the countryside, without any vested interest.

ADATS’ initial reaction was, without comment, to accept acts of Legislature as *fait accompli*. We did realise that wherever strong mass organisations of the poor existed, the proposed Act could be used in their favour. About the rest of the State, however, we were not so sure.

Later, on deeper reflection, we lauded the Act as a progressive measure. We realised that even if, in the initial stages, the Mandal Panchayat gave acts of feudal repression a certain legitimacy, these same acts would still have to be garbed within the democratic framework of the Act itself. And since the state power certainly was bourgeois, we were convinced that the values permitted for expression would necessarily be liberal ones. In a very short span of time, we felt, the Mandal Panchayats and Zilla Parishats would, rather than legitimise, tame these brutal acts of feudal repression for public scrutiny. In this manner, the Act would usher in a more progressive production relation in the countryside.

The Act was passed in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly in 1983, and got the President of India’s assent in July 1985. Zilla Parishat elections were notified for 2 January 1987 and Mandal Panchayat elections for 20 January 1987.

That the authors of this Act were sincere, and meant in letter and spirit, to usher in a new system of decentralised democracy and development was fully established when they convened a meeting of all Voluntary Agencies in Karnataka and requested social workers to educate the masses, help set up voters’ study groups, etc. Bagepalli taluk was divided into 4 Zilla Parishat constituencies with one reserved for a woman and one for a person from a scheduled caste/tribe. The taluk was divided into 10 Mandal Panchayats.

When the final delineation was made, we found that the 10 CEP Clusters and 3 older Clusters lay in the 4 Mandal Panchayats of Pathapalya, Billur, Chakwel and Chelur. The remaining 3 older Clusters got split into Gantamvaripalli, Devaragudipalli, and Mitemari Panchayats. Of these, only Kothakota Cluster in Gantamvaripalli Mandal Panchayat covered any significant geopolitical area.

#### IV

The questions raised in the first part of this report cropped up over and over again. These were gnawing questions that refused to give me respite. But I was not able to articulate them properly and therefore unable to get answers.

I had a vague sense of discomfort about the subtle change that had taken place in my own personal role as a result of the recent “public meetings”, but was unable to clearly communicate my worries beyond all the time repeating that I needed more clarity on the loaded question of “charisma”.

Would not the cautious strategy we had developed for 9 years – one where routine, discipline and grinding regularity had built up 26 strong and mature CSUs, 6 effective and working Cluster Meets, and the BCS Meeting be imperilled? Would not the carefully cultivated par-

icipatory equality where roles were clearly defined and each others' toes never treaded upon be thrown to the winds? Would not a chaotic thrill take place of systematic strife? Would not a temporary sensation replace painstaking determination? Were not these the real dangers involved when projecting a personality, even if for honest and valid reasons, into the forefront? Would not Coolie Sangha checks and controls on ADATS get eroded?

Against these nagging doubts was the fact that a mass fervour of hope and determination had been created; that an emotional bond between ADATS and the Coolies of Bagepalli did get sealed; that this lent more credibility to the Coolie Sangha Model of Development; that an innocent spontaneity marked the whole development. Detrimental, perhaps, but attractive nevertheless.

Were we correct in our presumption that euphoria, per se, was not the problem? That only when this euphoria was at the expense of a systematic effort would it lead to non lasting achievements?

## V

A great enthusiasm greeted the announcement of elections to the Zilla Parishats and Mandal Panchayats. Many CSUs, old and new, wanted to participate in the ensuing Mandal elections. Our immediate reaction was one of caution. Sober calculation told us that it would not be wise to contemplate such a massive strategy in the CEP area till at least the second Mandal elections in 1992.

At the same time, we saw a golden opportunity to try and usher in a new culture of true participation and grassroots involvement into the Mandal Panchayats. We know that the Coolie Sangha was the most apt body to influence the Mandal Panchayats since it was grass rooted represented the very people for whom the Mandal was primarily meant for, was active on a day to day basis, and stood for the same principles of democracy and development albeit for the Coolie caste-class.

We operationalised this possibility along with the Coolies. Mandal agendas would be thoroughly discussed, in advance, by all the concerned Coolies in their CSU Meetings and Cluster Meets, and CSU Mandal Members would only be spokespersons to represent Coolie opinions in the Mandal Panchayat meetings. Coolies would influence village schools, health care, sites distribution, Janata house construction, drinking water and other schemes, selection and control of beneficiaries in IRDP and *Anthyodaya* programmes, etc. in such a manner as to bring justice into all these and empower themselves by giving their Sanghas teeth at the same time.

After a lot of discussions among ourselves, we finally decided to help the Coolies participate in the Mandal elections. We also decided that no one working in ADATS, at any level would stand as candidate and that ADATS would not bear the expenses involved either directly or indirectly.

But the decision to participate posed many problems. The old and new CSUs, were at different stages of development with vast differences in the maturity of the Coolies. Their reasons for contesting varied and their expectations were different. Coolies in the CEP area in their euphoria were not able to make a broad political appraisal of even their own Mandals. But in the older CSUs, they were quite capable of participating in a search for what was best for them. As a result there was a need for ADATS to intervene and develop an astute political strategy applicable to both, the old and new villages.

Since the CEP area constituted the larger geographical area where more CSUs were involved and more seats were going to be contested, and since the whole of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE

SANGHA could have only one uniform position and strategy, the opinions of the older and more mature CSUs and Clusters could not be given due weight.

This was the first non-participatory, and thereby alienating, step that we were forced to take. It must therefore be understood that when we talk about Coolie positions in this Report, we mean the proxy role that ADATS assumed on behalf of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA because of the CEP area.

## VI

We realised that the first plank in the Coolies' Mandal election strategy lay in the position we took *vis-à-vis* the Zilla Parishat elections. To be totally non committal would have been the best, but that would have been interpreted as an attempt to snatch away a fundamental political right.

Boycott slogans have always failed because they do not recognise the voters' deep rooted need to participate. It is only when an election campaign is on that each and every individual Coolie is approached and treated with respect. For the poor, an election is the only moment when an identity and self esteem surface without fear. Election becomes a chance to level the rich and humble the mighty. A nonchalance sets in and cautious thoughts of having to approach the same Master the very next day are abandoned.

King makers, political strategists and campaign managers have always recognised this, and yet, only the most seasoned among them can stomach this seemingly irrational arrogance in the electorate. For facilitators like us who have no personal stakes or ulterior motives, the phenomenon can be very disturbing.

This does not mean that cynicism doesn't exist or that the electorate have any great expectations as to the outcome of a poll. It only indicates that for the vast majority, it is the process of elections that counts and not the product. And participation in this process means a great deal.

We were acutely aware of the fact that the tremendous political aspiration that had recently been unleashed in the CEP area was, in the main, an immature one. Strong and powerful, no doubt, but not one leading to a mature assessment of what was best for them. The objective need to enter into the Panchayat Raj system in order to increase their bargaining capacity and enhance their social status was shadowed behind the more powerful urge to show their strength and humiliate their *Ryots*; a petty parochialism that took precedence over achieving a lasting gain. This kind of excited emotion, though perfectly understandable has always been short lived and no one could predict when it would suddenly fizzle out, leaving no trace at all of the frenzy. In this sense, the potential was counter productive and self defeating.

When the euphoria was over, these same Coolies would realise that they have been, from the beginning the trusted and proven vote bank of the Congress-I. So any move in the Zilla Parishat elections that could even remotely be interpreted as being anti-Congress could well break the bubble, leaving a somewhat confused mass of Coolies sheepishly lining up to vote for the Congress-I in this and all subsequent elections for quite some years to come. In order to project Coolie interests, and not out of any prejudice against the Congress-I, this had to be avoided at all cost.

Therefore, the only possible position we could take in the Zilla Parishat elections was one of non-interference. Coolies had to be given a full and free choice to vote for whosoever they wished, with no whip issued in anybody's favour. This was the only political strategy that could effectively deal with all the factors involved and at the same time prepare the Coolies as an independent force, psychologically capable of facing the Mandal elections on their own. Any other position would have banked on a negative vote – electoral the worst possible mandate to ask for or get.

Going back by 40 years into the political history of Bagepalli taluk showed us that the then Ruling Party could be effectively challenged not by posing alternatives to it, but by instilling a political aspiration in a viable section of the electorate to itself become an alternative. When the then tenant peasant class was offered a chance to take the mantle of electoral leadership, carrying with it the whole of the exploited peasantry, including the Coolies, it responded with a vigour, establishing its presence in every subsequent election.

This same class evolved into the, till recently, United Opposition in the taluk and has now transmuted into the Janata Party. Had the political activists at that time projected themselves as candidates and tried to develop the same tenant-peasant class as their voters, they would have failed. The important lesson to learn from this historic precedent is that, in electoral politics, it is vital to offer a fine solution within the grasp of the politically aspiring class in the form of slogans and programmes.

The Janata Party had, in the meantime, assessed our strength quite differently. The political picture in Bagepalli taluk was very confusing in those last days of 1986 and Janata workers over-assessed our strength. Our position of non interference frightened them very much and they approached us to try and make us change our mind. But they did not dare to offer us support in the Mandal elections as exchange because, in their own assessment, it could well be they who would be needing our support and not the other way around. While making no move to alter our strategic position, we did everything possible to cultivate this myth. As the Zilla Parishat election date drew nearer; jitters in the Janata camp grew more.

The Congress-I on the other hand stood to gain by our non-interference strategy since we had the largest chunk of their vote bank – the Coolies – with us. Being a much shrewder party, and in constant election gear, they had no apprehensions about the ensuing Mandal elections. When finally, they did begin to worry, they smoothly shifted into crisis gear.

## VII

This first plank in the Mandal election strategy was developed in the CEP area, keeping in mind relatively weak Coolies and immature CSUs and Clusters. There, the Coolies were mature enough to not get carried away by temporary euphoria or exciting emotions. They felt that they were not strong enough to contest on their own. Most of them wanted an alliance with the lesser force, not because of any faith or affection, but in order to ward off worse anti-Coolie forces in the villages.

It must be clearly stated, to avoid any misunderstanding, that neither ADATS nor the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA had or have any political preference between the Janata Party and the Congress-I. While the policies and declarations of the Congress-I, are attractive at the national level, there is no way of aligning with its practices in the local context. The Janata Party, in the popular understanding of the Coolies, is a revivalist force of the Reddy's and Janata leaders have done little to dispel these suspicions. The ultimate choice was between the relatively powerful, better organised and cohesive Congress-I on the one hand and the disorientated and weak Janata Party on the other.

Naturally, politically mature Coolies in the older villages opted for the latter since they stood no chance at all with the former. The Congress would have been too powerful on its own merit and the Coolies realised that there could be no profitable partnership between unequals. Contrary to a popular belief in certain political circles, I do not think that the fact of the Janata Party being in power in Karnataka influenced the Coolies' decision in any way.

At the same time, in the CEP area there was a marked and definite affection for the Congress-I. Congress workers were shrewd enough to exploit each and every instance of village disharmony to drive home their propaganda that the Janata Party comprised of and represented the very same middle and rich peasants who humiliated Coolies. That Congressmen commit-

ted equally bad crimes was not politicised by a relatively naive and more conscientious Janata Party, led by rural gentlemen.

But as explained in the preceding pages of this Report, it was not possible for the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA to take 2 separate stands on the same issue. The whip of total non-interference had to be uniformly applied in all the villages, old and new. We had to enforce a discipline on everybody to not directly or indirectly campaign for or against anyone in the Zilla Parishat elections.

In the older villages this was greeted with disenthousiasm. Secretly, many defied the direction and campaigned for the Janata Party. We had no choice but to look the other way and pretend not to see. But when this started causing problems in the CEP area we had to come out with a very officious sounding reason that we, being a Voluntary Agency, did not have a mandate to dabble in party politics and their election campaigns. This pronouncement was met with a snort of general disbelief!

### VIII

The second plan in our Mandal election strategy lay in the selection of candidates. There were 2 aspects to this. This first was timing and the second was selection procedure. Both require comment.

In the last days of December 1986 when all the political parties were in the final and most crucial stage of their respective campaigns for the Zilla Parishats elections, we asked the CSUs to select their Mandal candidates.

In our earlier rounds of “public meetings” and village visits we had talked about Coolies casting their votes for themselves and gaining an entry into the Mandal Panchayats. We had said that Coolies, though unread and inexperienced at least knew the definition of suffering and hardship from first hand experience. A Coolie would, therefore never be instrumental in making anyone else go through the same living hell that she or he had suffered. In our civil institutions, we had declared this touch of humanity was what was missing. To be a Coolie was qualification enough to contest. And, we had continued, the most important fact was that the Sangha was alive on a day to day basis and the Coolie was answerable to her or his CSU which was the umbilical chord of existence in a *Ryot* dominated environment.

Now the question was, which particular Coolie should be the candidate. Since the slogan ran “Your Vote for Yourself!”

and since only Coolies from a particular village knew which Coolie represented them the most, the choice should be left entirely to the respective Coolie Sangha Units, we declared.

But many CSUs did not take this selection task seriously enough. In their excitement, they gave little thought to the personal merits and demerits of the candidates. In some villages this led to low candidate participation in the campaign due to fear and lack of leadership qualities. In some other villages, totally wrong persons were chosen. Had we, at that time, intervened and played a more active role, things would have turned out differently. But we, as well as the Coolies, gave little thought to winnability, political maturity or even the candidates’ ability to perform.

But we were faced with an impetuous situation where improvisation was the only rule in the game. CSUs selecting their own candidates, if not anything else served as an accurate indicator of their political maturity. This was to be a great learning experience for Coolies as well as for us, forcefully driving home the need for seriousness and discipline.

## IX

49 Coolies were selected to contest from 58 CSUs. Of these 10 were from Pathapalya Mandal Panchayat, 8 from Billur, 6 from Chakwel and 15 from Chelur in the CEP area. From Mittemari and Gantamvaripalli Mandal Panchayats in the old area, 10 Coolies contested.

Coolies needed technical assistance to file their nominations, go through scrutiny safely and get their election symbols allotted. 2 senior ADATS Staff took this responsibility. They were tense and hectic days since none of us really knew how to go about it. Even simple mistakes or procedural omissions would have resulted in rejection during scrutiny. But in all 49 CSU candidates came through scrutiny without a single disqualification.

Just before the Zilla Parishat elections, the Janata Government in Karnataka promulgated the Anti Defection Ordinance. Candidates winning on a particular ticket couldn't later switch their allegiance to another political party or vote against the interests of their party.

Contesting Zilla Parishats and Mandal Panchayat elections on party tickets itself was a questionable matter since local body elections stir up more passions than larger ones and the factions created take a long time to heal. But the mood in the middle class and in the press was one of disgust at defections and the Ordinance was generally welcomed. Though an attempt was made to question the advisability of giving a party colour to local body elections, this was largely ignored as a dead issue.

We interpreted the Anti Defection Ordinance and the giving of party tickets to local body candidates differently, seeing a connection between the two. We did not feel that an altruism or a popular demand played any role in the matter. Any Political Party, in order to gain clout, needs to get the active support of the local bodies in addition to a comfortable majority in the Assembly. To carry the members and chiefs of various Co-operative Societies, Service & Credit Institutions, Municipalities, City Corporations, and now, the Mandal Panchayats and Zilla Parishats is no easy task. The Janata Party argued that these bodies are *de jure* non party, but *de facto* very much party controlled. In order to consolidate the position of the Janata Party, expecting a sweep in the polls, the Anti Defection Ordinance was promulgated. It would now no more be necessary for the Janata to cajole, carry and be at the mercy of thousands of individual leaders spread all over the State, provided they managed in the first instance to win them on their party ticket.

The Anti Defection Ordinance had yet another implication. It drove home our point that, whatever be other considerations, allying with any Political Party would not be in the interest of the Coolie class. CSU candidates who win on a party ticket would not be free to dispassionately act in the best interests of the Coolies. What was the guarantee that the Janata Party or the Congress-I would, at all times and in all circumstances act in the best interest of the Coolies? Then, how will our Coolie Mandal Members respond with their hands tied by the directives of the party whose ticket they had won on? This argument convinced even many of the older CSUs that our position of non-interference was essentially correct.

It was agreed that since the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA was not a political party, CSU candidate would contest as Independents. However, only 37 contested as Independents and 11 Coolies took the Janata symbol. But it was clearly understood that all 48 were CSU candidates selected by the respective Sanghas and approved by the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA. These figures do not include Coolies who, in the wave, contested in villages without CSUs.

12 of our candidates were women, and 37 belonged to scheduled caste/tribe. 15 of them were SC/ST persons contesting in general seats against upper caste candidates. This last had never happened anywhere in Kolar district, and did a lot to boost the self respect and confidence of Coolies.

## X

After having offered this 2 plank election strategy and having technically assisted them in filing nominations, I was advised that ADATS should retire from the Mandal elections and leave the rest to the Coolies themselves. To press further would have tested our personal relationship with the Coolies severely. The huge, already overblown bubble of euphoria in the CEP area could burst at any time. If that were to happen our reaction would have been to interpret it as an act of personal betrayal, and this would have endangered the future work of ADATS. The proven Coolie Sangha building strategy, even if less exciting, was a surer bet. Another well-wisher advised me to retire, not because he anticipated any negative results, but because of the evident problems that would follow if politically immature Coolies were to win from equally weak CSUs that could not control them. The whole mantle of an impossible responsibility would then fall entirely on me.

I too saw the wisdom in this sound advice and announced my stepping aside in the hugely attended BCS meeting on 3 January 1987.

Very vociferous protests followed my announcement and euphoria being a contagious thing, I rescinded my decision. I agreed to undertake a massive and very trying campaign tour covering as many as 17 election meetings in a day! The senior Staff of ADATS registered their protests and threatened to not accompany me on this hectic programme. But it was entirely to their credit and not mine, that they finally did participate with a vigour and enthusiasm that had no trace of reservation.

I must say, in my own defence, that the logical analysis of all that has happened from mid 1986 was not before me as it is today. Even my advisors acted out of intuition alone. And as I have said earlier, a spontaneity marked the whole period and I too was caught in the euphoria that I myself had created.

## XI

We will never forget those hectic days in mid January 1987. We were showered with an affection we have never experienced before. Coolies, by the hundreds poured in from the surrounding villages. Our meetings were more like victory celebrations even in places where the CSU candidates had absolutely no chance of winning at all.

While the Janata and the Congress had to go house to house soliciting votes, our campaign was a spontaneous celebration. While election campaigns were getting costlier by the year, CSU candidates were not even allowed to spend so that they could not, after winning, claim any special place or power. CSU candidates were, in the true sense of the word, to represent their CSUs and the slogan ran "Our Votes for Ourselves."

Throughout the campaign we made it a point to never ask for a negative vote, always keeping in mind our definite objective to usher in a new political culture into the local bodies and distinguishing them from state institutions. Leaders of the Janata Party and the Congress-I and their parties, *per se*, were never criticised. On the other hand positive features in their positions were highlighted.

Our questions were only on the implementation of their pronouncements and programmes through village leaders. We said that our quarrel was only with these village leaders who were hell bent on hanging on to power and privilege even if it meant distorting and sabotaging their professed parties stand.

In this manner we made it abundantly clear that the Coolies were not providing any political alternatives by contesting the Mandal elections; indeed they could not. The difference between civil bodies and state institutions became crystal clear as our campaign progressed. So too the need to not mix the 2 and keep the former outside party political considerations.

The difference between the Zilla Parishat and Mandal Panchayat was cited over and over again in this context. That while the Zilla Parishat was to draw up plans and programmes based on policies derived from party political ideologies, the Mandal Panchayats were civil bodies of people's representatives to implement these programmes; that while the 4 persons who won the Zilla Parishat elections would go and sit in Kolar (the district headquarters), the Coolies contest was to make all the poor people sit with dignity and self respect in their own villages that while there was no dearth of laws and schemes to benefit the poor; there was a lack of political will to implement them at the village level; that while both the Janata Party and the Congress-I couldn't possibly want rural deterioration or a continuation of dehumanisation neither had they the people to translate their intentions at the grass root level.

Coolies have no quarrel with either the Janata Party or the Congress, we declared. Our appreciation of their policies and programmes was the same. Therefore the decision to not interfere in the Zilla Parishat elections.

But, we continued, our condemnation of those who spoke in their names at the village level was also the same. Therefore the decision to field CSU candidates for the Mandal Panchayat elections.

Trust no one to do your job for you, we warned the Coolies. You alone can usher in a new political culture based on principles and justice to end poverty by de-politicising the local bodies. The dreams of those who formulated these laws and schemes will thereby come true!

We now realise, in retrospect, that hammering home this point day after day in village after village, throughout the campaign, had 2 results. It gained us a moral credibility in not just the Coolies' minds, but also in the rest of the electorate. At the same time it totally alienated local village leaders, making it possible for them to join us, however powerful the wave in our favour had become. To quote a gleeful comment I overheard one Coolie make to another after one of my election speeches,

“Ram has wrapped all our village leaders of all parties together in a blanket and hit them on their collective head.”

Here lay the main reason for the Coolies defeat in the Mandal Panchayats elections. Humiliated village leaders as hell bent on hanging on to power as to avenge our slight on them, turned with a vehemence against us. While many bigger leaders, and even candidates in many constituencies were prepared to call off their campaigns as non-starters, their village level election agents spared no cost or effort to make their respective candidates win.

They started smear campaigns of calumny against ADATS, attributing all sorts of base motives to our supporting the Coolies. Ironically, it was Janata Party leaders who went out and checked these slanders, openly disassociating themselves from their agents' doings. Many Janata Party leaders and even one top Congress-I, functionary openly declared that they could not question the moral authenticity of our campaign. Whatever be the electoral consequence of admitting this, they said, larger political responsibilities demanded that they admit the truth in our argument. These declarations were not, we are convinced, wholly motivated by political expediency alone and a peculiar situation resulted with Janata Party leaders discussing broader political questions with an open mind in the midst of an election campaign where we were pitted against each other!

This last provided a stunned Congress-I, stupefied by the high visibility, open transparency and popular response to our campaign with a heaven sent cue that they desperately needed. Their village level election agents were quick to dub us as the Janata Party in disguise. Since Coolies would never desert the memory of Indira Gandhi for the sake of the Janata, they said, ADATS had set up this huge hoax of the Coolie Sangha on behalf of the Janata Party.

Janata Party leaders unwittingly contributed to authenticating the charge by their gentlemanly decency and political naiveté. But the real reason why we did not succeed in refuting this false charge was because the subtleties involved in political analysis and strategy formation do not result in clear black and white pictures that can be explained to a non politicised mass of people. Faith and trust play a great role, and in a few villages where our earlier rounds of “public meetings” were not followed up with reinforcing work by complacent Community Workers and VLWs, where a personal relationship was not forged, Coolies began to doubt our motives. Added to this was the fact that some CSU candidates were actually contesting on Janata symbols. In about a quarter of the CEP area we were not able to quell the undercurrent of suspicion that was very shrewdly sown in our people.

Combined with a heavy influx of money and liquor in the very last minute these village leaders managed to stop sympathetic non Coolie votes from reaching us and CSU candidates suffered a heavy debacle in spite of polling Coolie votes in most places.

## XII

Perhaps the bravest contests of all were at Peddur and Muddalapalli constituencies where captured Coolie votes accounted for only 21% and 20% respectively. We had at first dissuaded these CSUs from entering into the fray, but their need to set right old scores was so deep that we had reluctantly agreed. At Beerangavanlapalli, a few kilometres north of Peddur, I made a moving speech and declared the Coolie contest to be morally just. The Harijana candidate from Peddur CSU polled 17% in a 4 cornered fight, and the tribal from Muddalapalli Kotha Thanda CSU polled 40% of the votes in a straight fight. The Harijana was contesting against upper caste *Ryots* in a general seat.

Rascheruvu village had never seen a local body election being contested. The village landlord/priest/contractor/had always been returned unopposed to become the Panchayat Chairman. A Harijana CSU Member challenged him in the general seat, losing by a mere 94 votes. His running mates were a Harijana woman from the same village who also lost by 110 votes, and a tribal from the neighbouring Egava Thanda CSU who won by 254 votes.

In Somnathpura and Rachavarapalli constituencies of Pathapalya Mandal, Janata leaders actually failed to find viable candidates to oppose the 6 Coolies who had filed their nominations. They tricked our people into signing some forms in the last minute by which the Janata symbol was allotted to 5 of them. To have refused would have meant withdrawal from the contest. This had the nasty result of uniting all the others – the Congress-I, the CPI(M) and rebel Janata workers – to field 6 common candidates in straight fights against us. We had entered the contest with captured votes of 32% and 46% respectively, expecting to win comfortably in 4 cornered contests. We paid heavily for this unwanted alliance when we got 44% of the polled votes in Somnathpura and 29% in Rachavarapalli, but lost 5 of the 6 seats in ADATS’ home constituency.

Middle peasant women responded to our appeal that they, like Coolies, were oppressed and exploited; that the Coolie Sangha Model had a lot to offer them though they belonged to the *Ryot* class. The extra 12% we polled in Somnathpura constituency was their votes.

In Nagarlu I constituency where the CSU candidate took the Janata symbol, we expected a 62% winning chance but polled only 56%, winning by a mere 20 votes. This showed that even in a solid bastion with a very mature CSU, disfavour with opposers of the Congress-I, ran deep in the Coolies. This phenomenon was proved beyond doubt in Byrepalli CSU and Byregollapalli CSU where the Janata opposed us. The CSU candidates polled 100 votes, Congress-I 11 votes, CPI(M) 5 votes and the Janata won with 122 votes. The wisdom in not allying with anyone was driven home with a force by this Nagarlu II constituency result.

In Shivapura constituency we miscalculated our chances. A forecast we made on the basis of number of houses showed a 63% chance of winning and so the Community Workers, 2 VLWs and the CSU Representative of Shivapura and Gadivanlapalli CSUs concentrated all their efforts on the Besthalapalli constituency where we had only 20% chances. When on election day, a mere 6 Coolies cross voted, we lost the Shivapura seat to the CPI(M) by 22 votes.

The Peddareddipalli contest in Kallipalli constituency was just a show of defiance. Of the 3 seats in the constituency, Peddareddipalli Coolies contested only one seat reserved for a woman and polled 9.6%.

At Ramanpadi, the tempo was at a very high pitch with a 56% winning chance till the last minute, when the bubble burst. Coolies got cold feet and a third of the CSU surrendered to the powerful landlord who stood against the CSU candidate. The same phenomenon took place in Arigevarigutta, Mandyampalli and Ramojipalli where we had a 62%, 28% and 56% chance of winning respectively.

In Kondikonda constituency 2 tribal Coolies won unopposed, one of them in a general seat. In Jelipigaripalli constituency the same was achieved when a tribal and a Harijana were elected unanimously.

In Jinkapalli constituency a CSU supported middle peasant won with a comfortable majority but his running mate, a Harijana from Kothurupalli CSU lost. Later, we found that he had forced himself into becoming the CSU candidate threatening to otherwise take another party's ticket.

In Nallagutlapalli constituency we lost because the Coolies succumbed to monetary temptations the night before the elections though Coolie women put up a tough fight openly defying their men folk. To quote the community worker

“Money, booze and lies carried the day. We, the only force that stands for democracy and development lost.”

The Venkatapuram contest for a reserved seat was spoilt by 3 of our own VLWs who defied the whip and set up 3 candidates, all CSU members. I declared the seat lost irrespective of the outcome, even though the official CSU Candidate polled more votes.

In Resenaikanapalli, our campaign was a non starter and in Billur constituency the Cluster Secretary himself sabotaged the chances of the 2 Harijana CSU candidate in favour of the Janata. It gave us immense satisfaction to note that in Bandarlapalli constituency with an 84% winning chance, he lost miserably.

In Kothakota constituency 2 CSU candidates and a CSU candidate supported middle peasant won comfortably on Janata tickets. 2 Coolies and a middle peasant won in Paragodu constituency where there was no CSU, but with BCS support. In Kondireddipalli constituency both the CSU candidates lost with independent symbols.

In Yellampalli constituency 2 CSU candidates with Janata symbols lost by hair splitting margins of 3 and 5 votes respectively. But the official Janata candidate their running mate for the women's seat, scraped through. In neighbouring Maddalakhane constituency the woman CSU candidate won comfortably with a Janata symbol.

In Aachepalli constituency of the 2 Harijana CSU candidate one struck a last minute alliance with the CPI(M) winning his seat, while the other lost miserably on his own.

In Chakwel Cluster, the Community Worker was not having too much success with Coolie Sangha formation. He tried to use the Mandal elections in order to arouse the Coolies. Chakwel had the loudest campaign with a very high visibility, but all 4 CSU candidates lost badly.

The final tally was:

<b>Mandal Panchayat</b>	<b>CSU</b>	<b>Janata</b>	<b>Cong-I</b>	<b>Others</b>
Pathapalya (22 seats)	2 (10)	10 (13)	7 (21)	3
Billur (26 seats)	1 (8)	10 (24)	9 (22)	6
Chakwel (26 seats)	0 (6)	14 (26)	12 (25)	0
Chelur (29 seats)	5 (15)	7 (24)	14 (24)	3
Mittemari (24 seats)	2 (5)	13 (10)	8 (21)	1
Gantamvaripalli (25 seats)	3 (5)	14 (22)	7 (25)	1
	<b>13 (49)</b>	<b>68 (129)</b>	<b>57 (138)</b>	<b>14</b>

(seats contested indicated in parenthesis)

### XIII

Chakwel, Mittemari and Gantamvaripalli Mandal Panchayats were the only ones in the 6 where CSUs contested that the Janata Party got a clear lead. In Pathapalya Mandal Panchayat the 2 CSU Mandal members had won on Janata symbols and therefore the Anti Defection Ordinance effected them. Moreover, there was absolutely no way that either the Coolies or we would have allowed the Congress-I leader of Pathapalya to form the Mandal.

This left Chelur and Billur Mandal Panchayats hanging in uncertainty. In Chelur we had almost as many seats as the Janata Party. Also, the Janata had won only in those constituencies where CSU candidates had contested, splitting traditional Congress votes and allowing the Janata candidates to win. The Janata party realised, with a shock that if Coolies had not contested they would not even have opened their score anywhere in the Chelur Mandal Panchayat.

3 CSU Mandal members and their constituencies wanted to support the Janata to form the Pradhan (chief) in exchange for a Coolie becoming the Upapradhan (vice-chief). Another 2 CSU Mandal members were noncommittal, but they did not object. On the basis of this seeming consensus, we assured the Janata of our support. The 3 CPI(M) Mandal members went along with this plan to reduce the Congress-I to a minority by one seat. Pradhan and Upapradhan elections were notified for 22 April 1987.

2 weeks before that date, the 2 Tribals who had won unanimously from Rajvanpalli CSU and Mugireddipalli Thanda CSU informed us that they would not support the Janata Party under any event. We immediately went to their villages where the sugalis cited many instances where, since the Mandal Panchayat elections, their local landlord (a rich peasant Janata leader) had humiliated and intimidated them. We were very surprised because this person was not really of that type. In any case, we told the Coolies, that the decision was entirely theirs, but they should not have put us in an awkward position by first agreeing and now refusing to support. We suggested, as a compromise, that their 2 CSU Mandal members not vote for anyone in the ensuing elections. The Coolies did not agree to this saying that they would support the Congress-I. We said that broader considerations prevented us from allowing that, and requested them to think things over.

That very night we were presented with irrefutable proof that there was absolutely no truth at all in the allegations made by the Sugalis, and that the 2 CSU Mandal members had received very large sums of moneys from the local Congress-I leader. We were shocked, and instructed that the entire matter be discussed in the Cluster Meet the next day by the Gunthuru-palli Community Worker, 6 VLWs, 6 Teachers and 18 elected CSU Representatives in the presence of the Field Assistant (CEP).

The Cluster Meet could not enforce any decision and so the matter was referred to me. But the 2 CSU Mandal members refused to meet me. Instead, they left for the Congress-I leader's place and did not turn up till voting time on 22 April, amply confirming the charges of cor-

ruption levelled against them. We directed the 2 CSUs to suspend their membership but they refused. As a result, the 2 CSUs themselves had to be suspended by the Cluster Meet.

We had, during the campaign, warned that we would go back to the Coolies in case any CSU Mandal member after winning, indulged in horse trading or acted against Coolie interests. And that is exactly what we did. Coolies in the CEP area agreed to go *en mass* to Chelur at 8 a.m. on 22 April to register their protest against both, the corrupters as well as the corrupted. Janata leaders volunteered to provide private transportation for all the Coolies from the CEP area to turn up at 8. a.m. on the voting day since the first buses came into Chelur only at 11 a.m. We therefore altered our original plan of asking everyone to walk. For some reason, however, they did not keep their word and when the defectors were whisked in under heavy escort at 10 a.m. there were hardly 200 Coolies from nearby villages watching helplessly. When the rest of the Coolies did arrive on their own at 11 a.m. it was all over in the Congress-I's favour.

At Billur, the Janata high command decided on their choice of Pradhan and Upapradhan after consultations with the 7 non Janata Mandal members. This irked the local Janata leader of Billur who himself aspired for the post but had been turned down by his party at the behest of the CPI(M). He simply got 2 other Janata Mandal members to join him and walked over to the other side (the Anti Defection Ordinance permits one-third of the elected members of a body to cross sides without it being considered a defection.) With Congress support he became the Pradhan and a Congressman the Upapradhan. Though his rebellion certainly was due to personal ambition, the Coolies in his Mandal perceived it as an anti-CPI(M) move and therefore did not question his credibility.

In the meantime, a deep controversy was raging in Karnataka. There was a provision in the Act to nominate 2 persons from backward classes where they were inadequately represented in the Mandal Panchayats. But just a few weeks earlier in a politically expedient move to gain favour by making concessions available to everyone, the Government had declared almost 98% of the population of Karnataka to be backward!

Without these nominations the Janata party could hardly a third of the Mandal Panchayats in Karnataka, conceding the rest to the Congress-I and others. But with 2 nominated Members in each Mandal, they were hopeful of getting over one half.

The attempt made by the Janata Government to nominate Mandal members was vehemently opposed by the Congress-I in the Legislative Assembly. Though the Government finally got its way it paid a very heavy price by way of erosion of their self professed practice of "value based politics".

#### XIV

A bitter aftertaste residued in the months of all well meaning people who had any expectations at all from the Karnataka Parishats, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and *Nyaya Panchayats* Act, 1983, and the elections notified there under.

The Coolies tried to shrink back into their shells of fatalistic apathy. They had dared to hope and dream but could now trust no one, not even their own candidates and elected members.

Election defeats always have a high price attached and demand that a heavy toll be paid. For me, it resulted in a total mental blackout where I could toll see only failure. When the figures stopped swimming before my eyes, I would see the unfairness of it all. All attempts to find out why the Coolies lost went in vicious circles.

First would come to mind the suggestion that the Coolies were outnumbered and we felt responsible because village coverage was inadequate. Then would follow the feeling that all

elections were dirty business where clean tactics had no place. And finally the lurking suspicion that our own strategies were derived from expedient considerations.

I smarted under the charge of being the Janata Party in disguise. Post election horse trading and our having to take a definite stand in Chelur did little to help. This was why, in mid April 1987, I decided to write this Report. I have personalised the narration not because I wish to monopolise credit or heap the responsibility for failure entirely onto myself, but for 2 very valid reasons. Firstly, the level of personal involvement of each and every one of us at ADATS was so intense and passionate that a cold and seemingly objective accounting would have falsified the true spirit had come to be a soul cleansing, intellectually clarifying and spiritually reviving exercise that I needed to go through in order to continue.

Before reaching its final form, this Report has gone through more than a dozen drafts with each version thoroughly discussed by all of us and verified for not just factual authenticity but also for feelings. We were helped by friends who give us a “third opinion” with deep and provocative questions to break the vicious circle we were caught in and to first, objectively record all that happened and then draw conclusions. To them, we are deeply indebted.

I am convinced that this Report has all the objectivity it needs because of this deep intellectual honesty and the underlying desire to not fool ourselves.

## XV

The evident and inescapable conclusion to draw is that the attempt was ill timed. To try and enter the Panchayat Raj system before a viable geopolitical coverage had been attained, before a minimum political maturity and organisational discipline was reached, was to preordain the attempt to an ignominious failure; that we got carried away by romantic visions of possibilities that the Mandal Panchayats offered.

But this is just a statement of the obvious that hardly helps in an exercise of serious retrospection. If, in spite of these very apparent facts that we could hardly have overlooked at that time, we intuitively recognised and responded to . It is for bringing out this sublime reason which was below the level of our conscious awareness that this whole analytical exercise becomes necessary.

In our search for profundity, we should not lightly dismiss the evident as non consequential. Therefore, our future responses to similar circumstances will certainly have all those points of caution that we have learnt by burning our fingers this time. We do not hesitate to categorically state that strong and viable village level CSUs are a must before the coolies venture into any adventure of the kind they did.

But what the attempt made by the Coolies of Bagepalli taluk to enter into the Mandal Panchayats laid bare was 2 facts. That the poor, when avenues for expression are offered to them through active and alive mass organisations, politically aspire to gain a greater control over their own lives. And that we, the bourgeois intelligentsia of whatever shade, have a role to play in assisting their struggle even when we are not quite convinced of the feasibility of the struggle and have questions on its advisability.

Granted that the Coolies form only a small percentage of the exploited classes in society. Granted that by themselves they have too narrow world views that just cannot attract the imagination of the other classes and therefore will not be given the mantle of leadership. Granted that they can, at the most, be only a critical factor that influences an electoral outcome.

But struggle, by itself, has a value that far exceeds the arguments that justify it. Struggle is a way of life. And struggle is the greatest teacher.

The political struggle of the Coolies of Bagepalli taught us the essential difference civil bodies and state institutions, defining the former to be delivery systems of policies and plans, and the latter as shapers of these programmes. It warned us to not overreach or mix the one with the other.

The struggle also defined the concept of participation when it taught us the essential difference between the scope of the mass organisation and the political organisation, the Coolie Sangha and the Political Party. That the former has a very definite role in influencing delivery systems by entering into them and making them work properly and as intended, while the latter has the possibility to shape the very intention itself.

For the Coolie Sangha to prerogate any function beyond this, in a unilateral manner, would be folly. The mass organisation can only influence the stated and instated intentions of the Political Party by opting or not opting to support it. But never by harbouring any political ambition of its own to become an alternative.

Through these 2 lessons it taught us that, in our anxiety to compete with Political Parties, there was no need to either emulate their practices or ally with one against the other. Such a decision should have been based on ideological considerations alone and not on expedient ones.

A reading of the classics would have told us all this, well in advance. But that would neither have had the intrinsic authenticity to guide us through impetuous moments, nor could it have been shared with the major participants the Coolies. We had to go through this experience in order to grow together.

And finally, the entire episode taught us that, for Coolie Sangha formation, systems alone were not enough. The development of an implementation technology of packages containing regular meetings, minutes books, cadre training, adult literacy. et al. is inevitable and indispensable if we are to cover large and geopolitically viable areas. But these are not enough. They have to be there along with a personal equation of intimacy with the Coolies, a calling by name a deep concern and affection that transcends objectives without, at the same time, subjugating the goals and yes charisma!