

0103. THIRD PROGRESS REPORT (Jan 1979)

The next 2 months – we are already talking about expanding our coverage from the 5 central villages to neighbouring ones and how this creates the need for VLWs. We then speak of land and wage issues.

November and December 1978 have been the harvest months. In practically all the villages freshly dug out groundnuts have been thrust at us by way of apology for lack of attendance at the Night Classes. The people have been very busy every day harvesting the groundnuts. In the evening they rush back for a quick meal, and are back again guarding the fields against poachers the entire night. Yet the harvest season has been a fertile season for issues related to the ownership control and cultivation of lands. Our hands have been full (not just with groundnuts) these past 2 months.

There has been a strong pressure on us to expand. Labourers from distant villages have been approaching us with issues and problems that we are just unable to take up for lack of time and personnel. At the same time, we realise that most of the contract wages issues that will crop up this coming summer when the public works department and famine relief works begin, just cannot be tackled unless we have a much wider coverage. We have also begun, these 2 months, to shake off our Harijan identity.

1. COVERAGE AND EXPANSION

The last day of the year was devoted solely to the question of coverage and expansion of our Group. In this meeting, we tried to rationalize the need we felt to expand our Group.

In regions where socio-political oppression is as high as economic exploitation, the people have a deep feeling of discontent. A small Group of committed activists could easily cover a large area of such a region, just going around and singing songs, promoting discussions, giving speeches, holding meetings for groups of villages etc. broad based common issues could soon be identified, and the people already existing discontent could be constructively channelised in the creation and working of mass organisations. In such regions, historic conditions of severe oppression of the masses have already, to some extent removed the state of alienation in them.

But in regions like Bagepalli taluk the political and social consciousness of the people is very low, though the level of economic exploitation is just as high their consciousness has been effectively lulled by a harmonious patron client relationship that prevails between the Landlord and labour classes. Due to this severe mental oppression, the people here accept a relationship of exploitation as very normal and natural.

A Group like ours dedicated to the task of killing this state of alienation; and instilling aspiration in the people has to work in a very concentrated manner for a number of years, taking issues that are very local in character, encouraging struggle, and thereby conscientising the exploited and also ourselves. This immediately limits the actual coverage of each Community Worker in terms of the number of villages that he or she can work in.

Therefore, any realistic expansion has to mean adding more persons to our Group. This at the same time, poses certain dangers. Any sudden expansion could instil institutionalisation. A batch of “new” Community Workers would pose a threat to the “seniority” of the old. Therefore, any addition to the Group has to be 1 or 2 at a time a period of waiting till they are absorbed and fully accepted as Group members, and then going in for more persons. This way, we would have natural growth that we could cope up with.

2. VILLAGE LEVEL WORKERS (VLWs)

In December 7 VLWs were selected by Community Workers and night classes were started in as many additional villages. these classes would be points of entry and acceptance for our Community Workers, who would soon be covering 4 villages each, through a total of 20 VLWs.

All the VLWs are compulsorily, labouring youth. We are very careful that they should not become salaried dependants on ADATS. At present they are singing songs, conducting games and literacy classes (mainly for children since the adults are busy with the harvest) and to a very limited extent they are holding discussions on key words. The only training that these VLWs have at present is that they have observed the Community Workers conduct literacy, hold discussions, sing *Mana Patalu*, enact skits, take up issues, etc. for the past 5 months in their own villages.

For these labour youth to be fully absorbed in our group, it would be necessary that they are a little more articulated in their understanding of society, the objects and methodology of ADATS etc. only then would we be able to have a real relationship of equality with them, for otherwise an element of intellectual domination will always exist.

For this purpose, and also in order to develop their leadership capacities, we will, from the month of January hold regular training sessions for 3 days every month. In these sessions they will be exposed to other peasant and workers organization and struggles in the country, be given some fundamental theory which would bear necessary for them to understand society, and also a continuous and ongoing reflection on the Bagepalli situation. Gopal Reddy, one of our Community Workers, has agreed to organise these training sessions every month at Bagepalli.

3. ISSUES

3.1. Somnathpura Sagubadi Chittis Issue

8 Harijan families have been tilling Government lands in Somnathpura village for a very long time. For many years, they have unsuccessfully tried to get Temporary Title Deeds for these lands. Every harvest, they pay some amount to the Village Secretary, so that he may not report their supposedly illegal tilling to the Government. This year, as the harvest approached, they asked Sathyamurthy, our Community Workers, to make one last attempt to help them get the *Sagubadi Chittis* (Temporary Title Deeds for Government lands).

Sathyamurthy wrote applications for them and asked them to get the Village Secretary's attestation. As was procedurally required. The Secretary refused, and the 8 Harijans, along with Sathyamurthy, came to Bagepalli to report his attitude to the Tahsildar.

At the Tahsildar's office, the entire came out. It was found that *Sagubadi Chittis* were made out and delivered to the 8 Harijans. The Village Secretary had even furnished their authentic thumb impressions on the forms stating that they had received the documents. A notice was immediately prepared and sent to the Village Secretary, asking him to explain the matter to higher officials.

Back in Somnathpura that evening, the Village Secretary failed to recognise the gravity of the situation. He demanded an amount of Rs 247 from each Harijan for issue of *Sagubadi Chittis*. When the people confronted him with what they had learnt, his only reply was, "Today is a second Saturday and the offices are closed. How did you get this information?" To this arrogance, he got a very sharp reaction.

The next day, the local Landlord whom the Harijans had looked up to with great reverence all these years, tried to support the Village Secretary. The theme he adopted was that it was quite

natural for the Secretary to use all the powers and means he had in order to attain wealth. He was a Brahmin. What right did the Harijans have to challenge him? For the very first time in their history, the Somnathpura Harijans reflected this line totally.

Sathyamurthy had been amazed at how they people had all along accepted their being exploited, cheated, and robbed, actually believing that this was their destined role in society, and that there was nothing wrong with it. this was the extent of alienation in the village.

We made a breakthrough when the Harijans rejected the Landlord's line of argument and intensified their demand on the secretary. After 2 days, he meekly asked them to pay Rs 6 each and handed over the *Sagubadi Chittis*. Each Harijan insisted on, and obtained, an official receipt for the amount.

3.2. Nakkalapalli Vadde Bovis

30 *Vadde Bovi* (another labour caste) families have been tilling 6 acres of Government land in Nakkalapalli village, 3 kilometres from Somnathpura, for the past 5 years. They have refused to give the demanded respect to their local and upcoming Landlord, who is also a groundnut merchant, and he has been on retaliation path for the past 4 years.

Along with the Landlord of Somnathpura this Landlord has arranged for 2 Harijans from Somnathpura (who have never seen the lands) to get *Sagubadi Chittis* for the same 6 acres that the *Vadde Bovi* families are tilling. This is because there is a natural spring following on this land, which makes it ideal for cultivation. The local Landlord has been eyeing the plot ever since the *Vadde Bovi* found this spring.

Conniving with the Village Secretary, the local and Somnathpura Landlords have managed to manipulate the *Pahani* records to show that the 2 Harijans have been tilling the plot for the past 5 years. To further complicate matters, the Somnathpura Landlord made the 2 Harijans mortgage the land (showing another plot during the spot inspection in order to avoid the *Vadde Bovis* attention) to the PLD Bank and took a loan of Rs 2,000 to dig a well. The well was never dug, and the Landlord kept the entire amount for himself, claiming that it was the amount he had spent in order to get them the *Sagubadi Chittis*.

The scheme hatched by the Nakkalapalli Landlord with the Somnathpura Landlord's support did not work as per plan. The *Vadde Bovis* refused to leave the land they had been tilling, even when it was allotted to the 2 Harijans.

The Landlords have recently began pressing the Harijans to stake their claim on these 6 acres and to evict the 30 *Vadde Bovi* families. Landlords belonging to this caste group are traditionally cowards and always instigate other group to do the dirty work for them. they are merely the schemers.

The 30 *Vadde Bovi* families represented the matter to Sathyamurthy, our Community Worker, who was put to the test. Was he really labour and justice oriented or just Harijan biased? In our Saturday meeting after discussing the issue thoroughly, we decided to support the 30 *Vadde Bovis* families. At the same time we felt that the Community Worker should use his tact in not alienating the Harijans.

The *Vadde Bovis* came to Bagepalli with Sathyamurthy an met the Tahsildar. He gave them a very sympathetic hearing, but expressed his inability to intervene since landless Harijans were involved in the matter and *Sagubadi Chittis* has already been issued to them. but he saw the mischievous role of the 2 Landlords in this matter. The *Vadde Bovis* returned and spread the impression to one and to all that the Landlords were now in grave trouble with the officials.

The 2 Landlords immediately summoned the Harijans and informed them that they never had any personal ambition on those 6 acres, and that the Harijans could keep it for themselves. The joyous Harijans returned to inform Sathyamurthy.

Sathyamurthy had to do some fast thinking. He knew that the lands could not be legally obtained by the *Vadde Bovis* as the Tahsildar had expressed his helplessness. Now, the Harijans trying to plough those lands would surely lead to a physical clash between the 2 labour groups, and this was to be avoided at all costs.

Some days back, officials from the PLD Bank had come to Somnathpura to collect dues from defaulting farmers. In a show of authority they had thrown out all the belongings of one caste farmer who had not repaid long pending instalments. Sathyamurthy seized this illustration to convince the Harijans. He told them not to touch the 6 acres unless and until the Landlord wrote an agreement on Rs 3.50 Stamp Paper that he was responsible for the loan of Rs 2,000 taken against it. Otherwise you will face the same fate as this farmer, Sathyamurthy said. The Harijans were quick to appreciate the point.

Presently, the Harijans are still trying to get the dodging Landlord to sign the agreement, and the 30 *Vadde Bovi* families will be harvesting their coriander crop in 15 days. Till the next cropping season in July/August an unnecessary clash between the labourers has been warded off.

In the meantime, the 30 *Vadde Bovis* will be meeting the Village Secretary to demand *Pahani* extracts. As per law, the *Pahani* has to be written in The same of the persons who have raised the crop, irrespective of the ownership of the land. The standing coriander crop, due for harvest in a fortnight, will be sufficient proof to demand the *Pahani* Extract in their name.

They will also, at the same time, negotiate with the Harijans to come to an agreement. This agreement, properly recorded on Stamp paper, along with the *Pahani* Extract, will give the *Vadde Bovis* a firmer hold on the land.

3.3. Kondireddipalli Contract Labourers

About 40 labourers of Kondireddipalli approached their Community Worker, Gopal Reddy, with a problem. They said that they had done 43 kuntas of road work under a Contractor from Bagepalli. He had agreed to pay them Rs 4 per kunta (a measure) on piece work. But his agent had paid them a total of Rs 60 only, and the Contractor refused to hear their pleas, stating that he had handed over the entire amount to the agent.

Gopal Reddy immediately arranged a representation to the Public Works Department, where the Engineer refused to have anything to do with they matter stating that his responsibility ended when the work was entrusted to the Contractor. After some time, however, he was forced to intervene due to the sheer number of labourers who squatted in his office, obstructing normal work. Along with a mediator, the group proceeded to the Contractor.

He was bullied into paying Rs 5 per kunta – Rs 1 more than what he had initially agreed to, for causing trouble and inconvenience to the labourers. This was perhaps the first time that a Bagepalli Contractor was “punished” for breaking his word.

Gopal Reddy, who travels this road quite regularly, decided to measure the actual quantity of work done. To his surprise only about 21 kuntas of earth work had been carried out. This was much lower than even he had suspected. When confronted, the Harijans said that they were aware of this all along, but the Contractor had claimed for 43 kuntas in his bill to the PWD.

3.4. Forcible Tilling in Pathapalya

On 24 November, 41 Harijan Tenants from Pathapalya walked 22 kms to Bagepalli to press the Land tribunal to settle their long pending tenancy Declarations. They received a fairly

sympathetic hearing, but were informed that since most of them did not know the Survey Numbers of the lands they were tilling, it would not be possible to go into individual cases without all the 100 odd Declarants present, for fear of overlap in granting the same land to 2 or more Tenants.

The Harijans demanded that the next sitting of the Tribunal be devoted to their Declaration and seeing their determination, this was agreed to. They were asked to come again on 14 December and that notices would be served to this effect to all the Pathapalya Tenants and Landlords.

Attendance in the Pathapalya Night Class, like in all other villages, had dropped to a trickle. In the daytime the people were all busy harvesting the groundnut, and at night they had to guard the fields against poachers. So now it was decided that all the 41 Declarants meet every night for at least an hour to discuss the next steps to be taken with regard to the forthcoming meeting on 14 December.

The Tribunal would decide the fate of their Declarations based on the *Pahani Extracts* that each Tenant/Landlord had to produce. This is a year-by-year record kept by the Village Secretary on each and every acre of land in the village. Details as to ownership of the crop raised, the status of cultivation, name of Tenant (if any), etc. is recorded in the *Pahani* records.

It became clear to the people that though they had come a long way in finally getting the Tribunal to fix a date for the hearing, the chances of their getting the lands were very slim. They would have to force the Members of the Land Tribunal to make spot inspections, not to decide on the basis of manipulated records, but on personal and physical verification.

This led to yet another problem. Most of the Harijan Tenants had been rejected 2½ years back when they first submitted their Declaration to the Tribunal. Now, a spot inspection would show the Landlords themselves tilling the lands. They had, therefore, to get these lands back in their control.

Plans were made for forcible tilling. But the question was the age old one of who would bell the cat. None of them had enough guts to actually go and forcibly till. For many nights resolution after resolution were passed, but no action followed in the mornings. Till finally, the most powerful Landlord of Pathapalya made a strategic error that went against him.

Just when we were planning the forcible tilling, he evicted his last 3 Tenants. One of them, Peddapaiah, had been very attached to him in the classical patron-client manner, and had only very reluctantly agreed to follow up his Declaration, unwillingly submitted 3 years back. Peddapaiah could not understand this act of Landlord and turned against him with the same intensity with which he had supported him all these years. He now resolved that, come what may, he would get back control and ownership of the plot he was tilling.

The other Harijans were overjoyed. On 8 December Peddapaiah, along with another just evicted Tenant, started the forcible tilling. The entire Harijanawada struck work that day and stood by with their ploughs to go and assist him in case there was any obstruction from the Landlord's paid henchmen. At 10 a.m. a messenger arrived and asked Peddapaiah to clear out. The people surged forward, the messenger wavered, and decided to quit. But 10:30 a.m. a freak rain started and within a short while it was impossible to continue tilling the slush. Peddapaiah was forced to return.

That afternoon, Peddapaiah had the first of 3 meetings with the Landlord. He was asked to leave the land. No chance. He would be given another plot. No thank you. The Landlord would plough, sow and cultivate; Peddapaiah could harvest the crop. Why didn't the Landlord offer to cook and feed him also (this last, we realised, was to avoid Peddapaiah tilling the land during the spot inspection)

The next day the lands were still too slushy to permit ploughing. The Landlord once again met Peddapaiah and offered another plot under a well. "No, this is the land I have claimed at the Tribunal, and this is the land I am going to till and get."

On the third day, the Landlord called him and said that he did not want a show down as it would affect his political image, and that Peddapaiah could continue tilling the land. But, he said it would be decided in the Tribunal shortly as to who owns it.

The meeting in Khasim Peera room on Sunday, 10 December was a jubilant one, with an air of triumph and determination in all the Harijans. Some more Harijans who had been evicted earlier decided to forcibly till their lands, following Peddapaiah's example and success.

In December, in spite of the Tribunal meeting being cancelled, the people walked to Bagepalli where they went singing Mana Patalu to the Taluk office. There they signed in the Register, recording the first of their 3 mandatory appearances.

On 20 December, it was decided in the CSU Meeting that Mareppa, another Tenant of the same Landlord, should go and till the land he was evicted from. The next morning he did so, and others stood by to support in case of trouble. 4 or 5 Landlords came and scolded him soundly, and threatened to have Khasim Peera thrown out of the village in a few days. Marappa broke down. The other Harijans could not persuade him to continue tilling. That night Mareppa's son came to the CSU Meeting to inform the others that his family would not go against the Landlords. He claimed that they stood a better chance of getting some lands on lease this way, but everyone understood that it was clearly a case of fear.

Plans are now being made for collective forcible tilling so that the entire struggle may not hang on the mettle of a single Harijan.