

## 0104. 4<sup>th</sup> Progress Report (Mar 1979)

*We speak of wage and land strikes in several villages and explain how these cause resistance to our presence in the taluk.*

### 1. ISSUES AND STRUGGLES

These past weeks, we have succeeded in obtaining tangible result in major issues like the Pathapalya Tenants struggle for their lands, the Yellampalli Harijans attempts to get houses, etc. but to claim that the Pathapalya and Yellampalli Harijans now have a greater faith in their organized unity would be a clear overstatement. This leads us to question the very validity of tackling issues, since in the last analysis they seem to have only a propaganda value for officials and other leaders. But still, issues involve struggle in their being solved, and this struggle has a great value in helping the people overcome their fear. Further, by taking issues that are close to the people's hearts, we are in the process of building a base of acceptability in the village.

We also realise that to attempt to conscientise the entire labour population of the villages is clearly impossible. It is much more realistic to attempt to build up a critical cadre of youth who have the potential to mobilise their people in the villages. Therefore, the monthly Cadre Training programme we have started for 3 days every month from January 1979 has now assumed a pivotal role around which our being relevant rotate.

We have also felt, these past few weeks, the need to have a more conventional activity which will give us an acceptable footing in the villages. Otherwise we fall easy prey to vested propaganda by the Landlords and others. Since we are already working with children in the villages, conducting games and classes for them in the evenings, we thought that this would be an ideal programme to systematise and strengthen.

#### 1.1. Lagumaddepalli Agricultural Labour Strike

The Lagumaddepalli agricultural labourers had always been receiving less wages than their counterparts from the surrounding villages. This had been bothering the youth very much, and for many months they had been pressing Suryakumari to organise everyone to strike, demanding an increase of Rs 1 from Rs 1.50 plus a meal to Rs 2.50 with a meal, or Rs 3 without.

The time they chose for such an action came at a most unconventional season, just after the groundnut harvest in January. Though all the rules governing agricultural labour strikes say that a boycott must be organised in the peak agricultural season, the Lagumaddepalli Unit of the Coolie Sangha reasoned that January was the only month when they could sustain a strike.

The odd un-gathered groundnut still left in the fields after the harvest would not prove viable for the farmers to gather. This was normally left for the aged labourers who, along with their grandchildren, would scan the fields with small hand tools. The Coolies Sangha decided that throughout the strike, all the abstaining labourers would pick this un-gathered groundnuts from the fields.

The few post-harvest agricultural operations that had to be performed in the village did not give it the status of a peak season, but nevertheless they were vital operation if the farmers wanted a good crop the next time.

The main problem was that the Lagumaddepalli Coolies had to make sure that labourers from surrounding villages did not come and work in their village during the strike. A team

went to all the surrounding villages and enlisted their cooperation. In spite of this, some labourers did turn up but they were convinced to go away by Middle Peasant youth who supported the strike.

The strike lasted for 8 days and even on the last, we were not sure if it would turn out to be a fiasco. Then all of a sudden, the couple of Landlords who were resisting and preventing the other farmers from conceding, gave in.

A very interesting feature of the Lagumaddepalli strike is that the middle peasantry, which is part-Labour part-cultivator-employing-Labour depending on the season, supported the strike and participated enthusiastically. This clearly indicates that the middle peasantry is aware that it is rapidly losing land, and that its labour interest has to be protected. Another feature of the strike is that unlike other peasant issues we have taken up in other villages, this strike has resulted in a group that is sure of the advantages of organised unity.

## 1.2. Yellampalli Harijans get Houses

The struggle of the Yellampalli Harijans finally bore fruit when 15 of them were granted Janata houses by the government, on sites that they insisted on. It may be recalled that there was an attempt by the caste Landlords of this village to grant houses to Harijans in a far away field, since they were planning to usurp the Harijans' well-situated lands.

The caste farmers made one last attempt to get the land by pressing for repayment of loans they had given to the Harijans, but in no avail. Due to determined representations by the Harijans, the government officials were forced to issue warnings to the caste farmers. The houses are now being built by the Harijans themselves and the caste farmers do not have the satisfaction of even getting the contract.

## 1.3. The Pathapalya Tenancy Issue

Since we last reported the people came to Bagepalli to attend the Tribunal. But when they arrived here, they found that the Meeting had been cancelled since the Chairman had been unable to come. Instead, a Meeting was going on, attended by the Deputy Commissioner (the district executive), the local MLA and the Tahsildar. The people demanded that they need these officials in order to lodge their protest at having had to walk 22 kilometres only to be told that the meeting was postponed. They extracted a promise that subsequent meetings of the Tribunal would be held at Pathapalya itself, in a temple close to the fields under dispute. The second meeting was fixed for January 1979.

This second meeting was also held in Bagepalli and the people did not choose to protest, since they were assured that the Tribunal would not decide on the basis of manipulated *Pathani Extracts*, and that it did not matter if the Tenants could not produce the Survey Numbers of the lands they were tilling. On this day, individual Tenants were asked to come and testify before the Tribunal members. Except for 2, all 41 Tenants impressed the Tribunal favourably.

The next meeting, on 13 February was held in the temple near Pathapalya. Other Tenants from near Pathapalya were first interviewed. When it came to Pathapalya, the Tribunal Member belatedly pretended to realise that most of the Declaration did not have Survey Numbers on their applications. They summarily announced that the applications could not be considered till the Survey Member were produced. When the Tenants pleaded that this was just what they had explained to the Tahsildar ever so many times, the Tribunal Members refused to hear them out.

All the Pathapalya Tenants gathered outside the venue of the Tribunal Meeting along with Khasim Peera, their Community Worker, in order to decide the next steps. In utter despera-

tion, they appealed to Khasim Peera to approach and convince the Chairman of the Tribunal (regional executive).

Khasim Peera obtained an interview and was explaining the matter to a rather attentive Chairman, when the Tahsildar intruded in a very rude and abusive manner. "These are trouble makers", he claimed, "they have come here to cheat the people. Lands that I have allotted to Harijans, they are instigating some *Vadde Bovis* to till." (this last being a reference to the Nakkalapalli incident reported in our Third Report) He went on and on till Khasim Peera lost his temper. The Harijans, who were scared stiff defended their Community Worker in a very weak manner.

Other Tribunal Members and Landlords seized the opportunity to "educate" the Harijans on the dangers of allowing outsider to cheat them. "We are all local people from these villages. Can any outsider come and help you better than we can? Are we not more aware of the problems and difficulties you are facing? Are we not concerned about you, our people?" "No, no, Khasim Peera is a good fellow!", is all that the frightened Harijans could weakly mutter in his defence.

By now, however, a problem had been created. In order to solve it, it was necessary to make concessions and appease the people. The Tahsildar said that they would not return the Declarations. They would keep them pending till the Taluk Surveyor was sent to the village. This was a major victory for the Tenants who had been trying to get around the Village Secretary and obtain Survey Numbers for a very long time.

On 20 February the Taluk Surveyor turned up and he was taken to all the fields by the Harijans. He found the correct Survey Numbers and entered them on the Declarations.

In the meantime we protested in the highest circles against the conduct of the Tahsildar. After proper representation, the Minister for Revenue Affairs, Karnataka, sent a letter to the Tahsildar asking him to give due respect and recognition to us, social workers. He verbally assured us that we most certainly had a role in helping the Tenants avail of facilities offered to them by law.

On 16 and 17 March, the Tribunal met again and after a spot inspection, granted 2½ acres of wet land under a tank to 11 Harijan Tenants. Very shortly, all the remaining Tenants will also be getting lands.

Our education process has to now intensify and continue...

#### 1.4. Houses Sites and Janata Houses

Since the Block Development Office had to depend on recommendations from the Landlords for distributing house sites and Janata houses to the houseless in the villages, this programme had almost exclusively become a means by which the faithful were rewarded. This is being challenged in all our villages by the Community Workers and VLWs.

In Guttameedapalli, 7 out of 20 houseless persons were excluded by the Landlord who gave the list to the BDO. Their VLW immediately arranged all 20 to come to Bagepalli and represent the plight of their 7 comrades who were in the bad books of the Landlord. They succeeded, and the Landlord is now furious.

In Nakkalapalli, the 30 *Vadde Bovi* families wanted that Janata houses be sanctioned on a raised piece of land close to their present dwelling. The local Landlord (irritated by the turn of events in the *Vadde Bovi*-Harijan relationship) instead manipulated to get their houses sanctioned on a distant plot close to the graveyard. They protested and forced the Tahsildar to serve a written warning to Village Secretary.

In Somnathpura, the Harijans are questioning their Panchayat's decision to auction a plot of land in the midst of the Harijanawada. The land would serve a better purpose if allotted to 3 destitute Harijans in the village.

## 2. RESISTANCE TO OUR EXPANSION TO NEW VILLAGE

Landlords and village officials have begun to accept us as an unavoidable nuisance factor in their lives. But they are quite keenly resolved into to let us enter into fresh villages and "spoil" the people.

When we took up one village, Kallipalli, on the invitation of the 40 Harijan families from there, the Landlords took great pains to immediately occupy all the empty rooms and huts overnights and we failed to secure anywhere to spend even one night till a Harijan youth offered us a corner.

We feel the need to have huts constructed on our own lands, and even the "settled" Community Workers live under the constant threat of eviction. Our office building in Bagepalli is no exception. The house owner is seriously considering evacuating us by the end of this month when our one year lease expires.

We are yet to see if the letter of the Revenue Minister to the Tahsildar will alter this state of affair.