

0108. Election to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly (Jan 1983)

THE CAMPAIGN

As soon as elections were declared, our Group sat down to discuss the various implications. We concluded that to attempt to bring in a fairly neutral state apparatus was the most congenial thing to continue our mass organization work. In the 1977-79 experience, a non Congress-I government proved to be far less repressive with their police/ intelligence wings. So, at all costs, the anti-authoritarian opposition had to be supported. We had to explain to the people that this would not bring the rains, and the drought, or solve any of their material problems, but the final decision heavily depended on the candidate.

In the United Democratic Front that was formed, Bagepalli constituency was given to the Communist Party of India-Marxists and Appaswamy Reddy the leader who had struggled for 32 years to build up the *Ryot Sangha* in the taluk and district, was asked to contest. Everybody welcomed the decision.

There was, as we discovered later, an element of anti Congress wave in Karnataka but this did not play a very important role in Bagepalli taluk. Here the united opposition and pro-Appaswamy Reddy wave accounted for the landslide victory with a lead of over 12,000 votes, polling over 60% of the votes cast.

Students and youth spontaneously took up the cause, creating, in the very first week of the campaign a high tempo and pro-Appaswamy Reddy waves. They worked for one full month on their own, in a very disciplined and orderly manner. Over 1,000 youth were involved in touring the villages, sitting with each voter for sometimes hours, explaining the issues involved. They covered practically all the villages on rented bicycles and concession fares on buses, meeting all their expenses themselves.

Coolie cadre from over 30 villages organised themselves into cultural troupes to tour the surrounding villages with specially composed songs, etc. and appealed directly to the Congress-I's "vote bank", the Harijans, Girijans and other minorities. Traditional landed leaders were unable to "guarantee" the votes of their villages to any party of their choice. In especially 2 areas, where the Left has on its own, no proper base, our Community Worker and VLWs managed to entirely campaign by themselves, breaking the *kanchi kota* (iron fort) of the Congress!

As opposed to the hundreds of thousands spent by the Congress-I candidate the Left Party candidates spent hardly Rs 20,000. And even this paltry sum was collected in tens and twenties from the people. Appaswamy Reddy goes down in the history of Karnataka as one of the only MLAs who collected both monies as well as votes from the electorate.

We took a very strict decision not to spend a paisa of ADATS money on the polls, in accordance to law. But the effort and contributions of the students, youth, our Group members, peasants and Coolies cadre, if monetised will run into lakhs of rupees!

We convinced the masses to vote in large numbers, without inducements from anyone. Many people even turned down the transportation the Congress-I traditionally arranges on polling day. The Bagepalli taluk part of our constituency (our taluk has been split, and a quarter given to Siddalaghatta, another quarter to Chintamani, and portion of 2 other taluks added on to us. In an attempt to break the traditional Left hold) had a record 80 per cent turnout! But the overall constituency turnout dropped to 65%.

Though ours was a do-or-die decision we were not confident of victory till polling day evening. We have a feeling that we would have continued our struggle even if we had lost. This is not only of academic interest to us, but a gauge of whether our Group is strongly in materialistic philosophy or not.

Counting started at the national college campus at 8 a.m. on the 6th. By 11:30 a.m. a lead of 7,000 votes had been established. By 3 p.m. we were sure, and the declaration was made at 4:15 p.m. Over 3,000 youth, who were waiting outside the national college campus, started a procession that rushed to town, picked up Appaswamy Reddy and covered the 1 kilometre long bazaar taking 6 hours!

By then we knew that Gundu Rao, Kagodu Thimmappa, and most of his ministerial colleagues had lost, that there was an anti-Indira wave in Karnataka. But till then, we had absolutely no indication at all. And in the midnight bulletin of 6th and 7th. January, we knew that the CPI(M) had absolute majority in Tripura, Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and the UDF (Janata, Kranti Ranga, CPI, CPI(M), and 12 Independents) in Karnataka, making history in South India.

AFTERMATH

A series of meeting on the election results were held here at Bagepalli where we separately analysed with our Group, the VLWs, and cadre from the 6 Clusters, the campaign experiences and results. It was a Herculean task, but very rewarding and educative for all of us. We will now try to summarize the consensus that came from out of these 8 meetings.

That there would be no major economic betterment of the people's lot was very clearly understood by everyone, and that the change was only from one bourgeois party to another bourgeois party, in spite of Left support to the UDF. We were very happily surprised to note that our people are politically clear enough to understand that even if the left comes to power through the ballot (as in West Bengal), their possibility to improve the economy would be extremely limited. Only a future liberalisation and democratisation of society is possible within the framework of bourgeois-democracy and class society. The only minor relief would be that a greater proportion of welfare and developmental schemes would now reach the masses, temporarily alleviating their problems. Therefore, it became quite clear that the Coolie cadre had not campaigned under any false illusions. The people, even if they cannot articulate it properly, are able to understand the invisible threads of capital by which the Ruling Party is bonded to the Ruling Class, even at a time when election victory obscures these threads and makes it appear that the masses control the ruling party. Taken as a measure of their political consciousness, we feel that our education programme has achieved quite a lot in the past 5 years of our work in Bagepalli taluk.

It was clearly a vote against corruption, police brutality, and officialdom. About a quarter of the mandate is on this score, and the electorate are not going to be disappointed. Corruption is already on the decline, and police and official atrocities were wiped out almost overnight, the evening of 6 January itself!

The massive part of the mandate was given by the middle peasantry who outright rejected the fumbling policies and programmes of the Congress-I to save the shattered peasant economy from inevitable ruin. Even the UDF (or for that matter the Left) cannot save the middle peasantry from onslaught of the laws of capitalization and pauperisation and so dissolution on this count is certain to set in the next 5 years. At most, it was an unreliable voter's mandate this time.

We have won because of the UDF and the straight fight, pooling the otherwise divided opposition votes that in previous elections had been shared by 4 to 5 candidates. The Congress-I vote bank has stayed unaffected, and they have got the same percentage as 5 years back. They

lost, quite unexpectedly, in 1977 due to the same factor what they called the “unholy alliance”. They fielded candidates for nearly every election in 1980 with a certainty of winning since they saw the alliance broken during Janata rule. This election victory in Karnataka should not be seen as any weakening of the Congress-I base.

Harijans, Girijans and other minorities have not voted for us (except in the 40 odd villages with ADATS influence where we polled 75-95% of their votes), and the Congress-I vote bank stayed unaffected. The minorities still consider the Congress-I as their saviours. This is because they have successfully exploited the *Ryot vs. Coolie* contradiction by socially aggravating it further through legislation, but without giving it an organisational channel to lead into constructive struggle. Only the feelings of animosity between these 2 classes – the middle and the poor peasantry is fuelled further by the Congress-I policies. The Coolies are thereby led to greater insecurity and they emerge as their protectors; and the Coolies as theirs by being a solid and reliable vote bank.

The organised left also falls into the trap by not just identifying but also treating the minorities as adversaries further alienating them, this is partly because the bulk of our rural intelligentsia is from the “animus” *Ryot* class and also because of a low level of analytical astutity and clarity in them.

Subjected to these subtle manipulations, the Harijans, Girijans and other minorities work silently, but as one united force throughout the length and breadth of the country, to destroy all electoral opposition to the Congress-I. Now that they have lost, they are waiting for the terrible backlash that they are convinced is coming. The killing of Harijans at Nanjungud (near Mysore) on the eve of polling only reinforces their panic. And the Congress-I has already capitalised on this fear by declaring the very next day that her party has a greater role in protecting the minorities than in the Legislative Assembly.

Though to a very much reduced extent this fear is prevalent in our taluk also. The Coolies expect Reddy Dharbar to start soon. The class value of the *Ryots* is such that they are not going to miss this opportunity to try and rule their writ for 5 years – the fact that the MLA is from the CPI(M) gives the minorities enough optimism to put up a resistance; but it is not just a matter of “convincing” the Harijans that they are wrong, that Bagepalli has been swept by a communist wave and not a Reddy, peasant wave, because this is not so.

Even earlier, we have maintained that the local Left, due to the relative educational and organisational advantages of the *Ryots*, as well as through the operation of *Sthana Bhalam* (a combination of strength derived from being rooted to a place, economic and social position etc.), has been dominated by the *Ryots* who conveniently talk about a united peasantry, completely ignoring the reality of the *Ryot Coolies* contradiction. They do not do this out of cunning, but because their social consciousness (which is derived from their class and material surroundings) completely drowns their intellectual or political consciousness (which is fairly low to begin with).

Therefore Reddy Dharbar and Middle Peasant oppression in the villages is a very distinct threat in the near future and cannot be either “wished away” or “convinced away”. The apprehension of the Coolies are very real and not imaginary. Even among the clearer sections of the Left, there will be a tendency to brush these forthcoming incidents under the carpet rather than to take firm steps, due to a subconscious fear of offending the very Middle peasantry that has so solidly voted for them this time.

With this in-depth analysis of the elections, we have collectively decided to re-commit ourselves even more firmly to building the mass organisation for Coolies and also to be a strong lobby/force to counter any signs of Middle Peasant oppression. We believe that an analysis based on the concept of a united peasantry is faulty and fraught with dangerous consequences. We shall continue to hold our position with regard to the big middle and small/poor

peasantry, following the principles of political unity, social harmony, and economic contradictions to be resolved through struggles alone, between these 2 sections of the peasantry.

We fully realise that this is not the accepted principles on which the Left in the region analyse and work, but attribute it to differences in our levels of consciousness. We have no desire to shift away from the mainstream of the organised Left and get isolated, forcing us into more romantic position of ineffectuality and impotence, but at the same time we do not want to get engulfed in the general level of what we believe is a lower consciousness. Rather, in a politically disciplined manner, we shall continue to work, and this positive determination of playing the role of a creative minority (as opposed to that of dissidents) is quite well understood and accepted by the leadership and the theoreticians of the left.

Our strategy for the next 5 years would be two-pronged; to solve the day to day problems of the Coolies by making sure that welfare and developmental schemes of the Government (like Janata houses, title deeds, drinking water, electrification, old aged and physical handicapped pensions, drought relief works, etc.) reach the people promptly without middle men and brokers knocking off their shares, and to continue our organisational and political education work through struggles and training programs. Another major decision is to systematically expand to start working in all the 200 odd villages of the taluk but without the children's programme or any monetary inputs. Details on this have still to be discussed and worked out.

We realise that we have a 5 year reprieve from Government and police harassment and our aim is to consolidate the Coolies Sangha in this period. The last 1½ years of police attack on us and the people has taught us the need for state apparatus neutrality; in mass organisation work. This has been the real advantage we have gained from the recent election victory, and we intend making full use of it.