

0113. Tenth progress Report (May 1986)

Covers an 8 month period and starts with an explanation of how systems and procedures in the Coolie Sangha (like, for example, the Suspension of Members) are internally and often painfully evolved. We then go on to describe the drought and the fodder problem...

It is with a certain amount of trepidation that ADATS introduced economic projects as inputs in its work in 1984. The paper "Philosophy of Economic Projects undertaken by Voluntary Agencies" emphasised on the viable non economic goals that we must set for ourselves and relentlessly pursue. This theoretical clarity has helped ADATS to make the very most of the Children's Programme, the Dairy Development Project, the Coolie Credit Funds (CCFs) and the Drought Relief Works in order to strengthen the mass organisation of the Coolies.

This is the last year that ADATS is going to work in the present 27 villages where we have been involved for the past 8½ years with Staff paid by ADATS. By the end of 1986 all the ADATS paid Village Level Workers will be withdrawn and the programmes, projects and activities will be managed by the Coolies themselves. Their elected Representatives and Coolie forums like the weekly CSU Meetings and Special Meetings, weekly Cluster Meets, monthly BCS Meetings, periodic Review Meets, etc. will manage everything with only a superficial support from ADATS.

At the central office, only 1 Field Worker (himself a Coolie selected from the Coolie Sangha and trained for this specific task) will represent and serve as a link between ADATS and these mature and established village CSUs in order to render support and assistance from 1987 onwards.

Therefore the formalising and consolidation of the Coolie controlled structures has been the most pressing objective for us these past months. As early as in December 1984 all the Community Workers (ADATS paid, each in charge of a Cluster of about 6 CSUs) left and we refused to replace them. In September 1985 12 VLWs (ADATS paid Coolie youth who worked under the CWs in their respective villages) were withdrawn from as many CSUs to work as Community Workers in the 60 new villages of the Chelur Expansion Programme (CEP). The experiences of these CSUs without Staff for the past so many months convinces us that this objective of ADATS withdrawal and the Coolie Sangha taking over is very realisable and meaningful.

The following Progress Report has to be threaded together and read in the light of this paramount concern and conviction of ours.

We have begun with the narration of a very typical example of how each and every single detail of the Coolie controlled structures of the mass organisation has evolved at Bagepalli over these years. These have been grassroots processes with a very real and definite role for ourselves in the process. This narration also illustrates the process by which theoretical positions and philosophical stances have been arrived at, through involvement with the Coolies.

The Dairy Development Project at Somnathpura Cluster

Somnathpura Cluster is, with its 7 CSUs, perhaps the most developed and mature Coolie Sangha where ADATS Staff have been almost fully withdrawn as early as in September 1985. Somnathpura Cluster has been the centre of long drawn out Coolie struggles against middle peasant cheating and oppression on land and wage issues; where petty corruption of village officials has been successfully challenged; where harsh repression from the landlord-police combine has been resisted; where local body elections have been contested and won by the Coolies; and where a rare and mature display of Coolie-Ryot unity has been shown when

common issues that demand joint struggle and sacrifice have come up. Somnathpura was the venue of the historic Coolie Pandaga, a real show of taluk level unity, determination and class aspiration.

It is no exaggeration to state that Somnathpura Cluster has given a lead and set the example for a whole taluk as far as Coolie Sangha formation is concerned. ADATS owes a great deal to the Coolies of Somnathpura Cluster for what they have taught us over these years. In February 1986 Somnathpura Cluster did it again!

Early one morning, we were informed at the central office that 3 Somnathpura CSU members had clandestinely sold their cross-bred cows the previous night, ostentatiously due to the fodder problem. One of these DDP loanees had sent away his cow by a van the previous night while the other 2 were making preparations to do so, and had already received advances from the buyers.

We immediately rushed to Somnathpura village and convened an emergency meeting of the CSU. The 3 elected Representatives and the rest of the Coolies feigned total ignorance and pretended to be shocked by the previous night's events which, they claimed, they had come to know only in the morning. It was wrong thing to have done, they declared, and immediate steps must be taken to ensure that the entire sale proceeds of these 3 cross-bred cows (given under the Coolie Sangha controlled DDP) be deposited with the bank to clear the outstanding DDP Loan Accounts of the erring loanees.

We disagreed and pointed out that the entire CSU had, after prolonged and serious deliberation, selected the 10 DDP loanees. Therefore it was the explicit responsibility of the CSU to ensure the smooth running of the DDP in their village. Important decisions like the one to sell a cross-bred cow ought to have been taken by the CSU and not be individual loanees.

ADATS was not blind to the acute fodder shortage in the taluk. Nor were we against the selling of a cross-bred cow to clear a Loan Account, *per se*. We only maintained that this matter should have been discussed in the Somnathpura CSU Meeting. Further, since it was grave issue that implied the abandoning of the DDP in the village, it should also have been discussed in the Cluster Meet. Procedurally, we maintained, this was a very serious lapse. It could be corrected only by returning the previously existing *status quo*.

We said that the Coolie whose cow had been lifted the previous night must bring back the animal, and the other 2 Coolies must return the advances they had taken. Till then, we declared, the Somnathpura CSU stood suspended!

That evening, the elected Representatives from the 6 other CSUs of the Cluster met in an emergency session and ratified our decision, suspending the Somnathpura CSU for 1 week. Within that week, they ordered, the sold cow had to be brought back and the advances returned. If these conditions were not met, the suspension would automatically be converted into a recommendation for cancellation to the BCS on the 8th day.

The 35 Member Coolie families of Somnathpura balked! They had not expected anything quite so drastic. Suspension meant a visible demonstration of punishment for the all the world to see, with the daily children's *Balakendra* stopped, milk from the remaining DDP loanees' cross-bred cows not being accepted for marketing the Coolie Sangha run Milk Collection Centre, the CCF account frozen, etc. In a situation where the middle peasants' jealous and vengeful eyes on them had to be warded off only with CSU strength, suspension also meant an exposure to a very real and physical danger of middle peasant backlash. And finally, suspension meant a permanent taint, on the record, the shame of which would be hard to live through and take a very long time to wipe out.

The Somnathpura Coolie pleaded with us the problems that getting back a cow, once sold, entailed. It is a custom here that livestock sale is an irreversible act and buying back of a cow

is treated as an entirely different transaction, demanding fresh negotiation unaffected by the previous. Transportation costs to bring back the cow from a village 50 kms away was yet another hurdle that they faced. All this involved expenses in a drought period that left them pauperised, and CCF amount was frozen... We refused to even lend a sympathetic ear to these grievances though we knew them to be genuine. We were convinced that this kind of disciplining was vital in this final year of consolidation.

On the 5th day of the suspension, the cow returned and regular activities were resumed from the 6th day onward...

The Question of Suspension

Some days after the suspension of Somnathpura CSU was lifted, a full fledged Cluster Meet was called for by the Somnathpura Coolies to discuss the question on CSU Suspension, a procedure which was not in the rule book at that time.

The Somnathpura Representatives pointed out that this cruel control measure was first used by the Project Director and then ratified by the Cluster Meet. The onus for thereby having created this harsh weapon, through the setting of a precedence, should therefore be placed squarely on the Project Director's shoulders.

The Cluster Meet deliberated on whether the Coolies of Somnathpura would have, on their own and without their CSU being suspended, brought sufficient pressure on the 3 erring Coolies to bring back the cow and return the advances. When the Somnathpura Coolies insisted that they would have, the entire Cluster pointedly asked them how a van could have entered a crowded Harijanawada in the middle of the night and loaded a bulky and protesting cow without a single Coolie realising what was happening. It was more realistic, they continued, to presume that all the Coolies knew what was happening, sympathised with the 3 Coolies who were clandestinely selling their DDP cows and therefore gave their consent to the action.

"They should, instead, have had the courage to bring the fodder problem out into the open for debate and discussion. Even the wisdom of giving cross-bred cows to Coolies during a drought could have been debated,"

the Cluster Meet declared and continued:

"The episode only showed that the entire CSU at Somnathpura was just a show; a pretence to please ADATS and grab benefits from a Voluntary Agency that refused to collaborate unless you formed yourselves into a Coolie Sangha"

Then came the final condemnation:

"It was sad that this was the case. After over 8 years of effort, the Coolies of Somnathpura have only perfected their skill of play-acting! Under these circumstances the quick and decisive action of the Project Director was correct since he has the overall responsibility to force you to form a real Coolie Sangha in your own interest – not just a superficial sham!"

Till then it was common for a CSU to suspend an erring Member Coolie family. But after this incident and the ruling of the Somnathpura Cluster Meet, CSU Suspension has been used by different Cluster meets for different reasons, thereby evolving yet another operational detail for running the mass organisation.¹

¹ I have not been left unmoved by the feeling of resentment towards the prerogated powers I wield at times. I have reflected on this point a lot and expressed these thoughts in my recent paper – "Coolie Sangha – a relevant strategy for the development of the poor" when dwelling on the role of the development work – R.E.

The Fodder Problem

An ironic coincidence took place at the same time as the Somnathpura drama. Bagepalli taluk, along with the rest of Karnataka state, is in the midst of an unprecedented drought. Normally drought is a perpetual menace in the lives of the Coolies who have to migrate in search of labour every year and reduce their already sub-human levels of consumption. But this year the drought has effected the entire rural population. Last year's near total failure of rains has resulted in an acute fodder shortage and most middle peasants have sold their work animals at less than a tenth of their fair value, with the gnawing certainty that they will have to buy back these same animals at inflated prices with the onset of this year's monsoons if at all they want to plough their fields.

Our Dairy Development Project has also been severely affected by this acute fodder shortage. In spite of the free fodder we had supplied to the Coolie loanees in the last weeks of 1985, most of them were facing a major problem. We realised that the DDP would be a total failure unless some radical solution was soon found. We started exploring the possibility of growing fodder on several central farms and building silage towers in all the DDP villages, etc.

At about this time, a dairy farmer friend of ours from Bangalore introduced us a new type of chopped, de-hydrated and bagged fodder which had just been introduced into the Karnataka market. About 3 kgs/day of this new fodder would meet the entire fodder requirement of an average cow at a cost of about Rs 1.50 per kg. We had just finished testing this new fodder for 3 weeks at our central dairy at Bagepalli and were working out the logistics of supplying it to the DDP loanees on credit, at cost price, when the 3 Somnathpura Coolie clandestinely sold their cows.

As soon as the Somnathpura CSU suspension was lifted, we started supplying 90 kgs of this new fodder to each DDP loanee every month with arrangements to recoup the cost from the milk money due to them from the Milk Collection Centres every fortnight.

As a result of this new development, it is possible for:

- a) Coolies to accurately compute the viability of dairy farming in monetary terms.
- b) Coolie with no land at all to go in for cross-bred cow maintenance.

This new chopped, de-hydrated and bagged fodder places the DDP on a much higher technological plane than the prevailing agricultural and dairy farming practices of the taluk's obsolete and unscientific peasant economy stagnating at a sustenance level. Now there is every reason to believe, specially since the DDP has a high training and skill upgrading component in it, that the Coolies can find a practical way to augment their earnings through cross-bred cow dairy farming.