

0115. Special Progress Report on Chelur Hobli (Sep 1985)

Covers a 2½ year period from April 1983 and speaks of cadre training, management training, and efforts to establish the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha.

We then speak about the failure of individual self sufficiency plans (for ourselves), and the reasons why collective production units (for the Coolie Sangha) were never set up.

We then explain the Coolie Pandaga (an annual getting together of thousands of Coolies) and end with a recording of various issues and struggles.

This report covers developments in the Coolie Sanghas in the 2½ years period April 1983 to September 1985. As a result of the evaluation of ADATS' 5 years work by Jan Neggers and Alex Tuscano we decided to introduce economic projects into our strategy for mass organisation work with the Coolies. In May 1984, December 1984 and August 1985 we have reported on the Dairy Development Project and the Coolie Credit Fund.

In December 1984, 4 of our 5 Community Workers resigned from the group. It was decided not to replace them. In May 1985 the new organisational structure of ADATS and the Coolies of Bagepalli was evolved. A major portion of the responsibilities for planning and implementing the programmes, projects and activities was given to the Coolies and their Sanghas.

In September 1985 the ADATS Expansion Programme into 60 more villages of the taluk was started. It was decided to promote 10 Village Level Workers as Community Workers to work in these new villages of the expansion programme. As a result, ADATS became staffed for the very first time with Coolies themselves working for Coolie development. In the 10 villages where the Village Level Workers were removed, it was decided not to replace them and ADATS has withdrawn all Staff, operating with elected Representatives of the Coolies, supported by a small technically proficient Staff at the Central Office. The remaining 20 Village Level Workers will also be withdrawn by December 1986. In their place, the Coolies will elect CSU Secretaries and Cluster Secretaries who will not be paid by ADATS, as has already happened in these 10 villages.

1. CADRE TRAINING, THE BCS & MANAGEMENT SKILL TRAINING

As soon as the evaluation was completed we restarted the rounds of cadre training which had been interrupted. We shared the observations made by Jan and Alex when giving us a third opinion of our 5 years work, and continued giving the Coolies an in depth knowledge of societal forces operating.

Since a popular Government of their choice had come into power in Karnataka, the expectations of the Coolies was fairly high. A considerable amount of time was spent during these cadre training in just discussing long pending issues and finding solutions and redress for grievances.

But efforts to form the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA were not quite as successful as we had expected them to be. Most of the discussions were one way affairs with us speaking and the Coolies listening politely. When it came to actually starting the monthly BCS Meeting there was a definite dragging of feet. Many Coolies attended but did not speak much. When we got tired of speaking and the silence became insufferable, we said that this was supposed to be a meeting we could disperse. Everyone quickly agreed, had lunch, and went home!

After the initial shock at things not turning out as we had planned and expected, we made a quick recovery. We went to all the villages and conducted fresh elections for CSU Representatives (called Prathinidhis). The idea of having different Committees in each CSU was abandoned and instead we asked them to elect 3 Representatives per CSU for one year terms

which expire every May Day with the right to recall. We then introduced the system of holding Cluster Meets on fixed days every week, in the morning at the central villages. The Project Director and the DDP Extension Worker (now the Executive Assistant) made it a point to attend each and every Cluster Meet and these Meets became the forums where a working relationship with ADATS was forged. The pace of Coolie participation in these Cluster Meets quickened and soon it was the elected Representatives who were representing the issues and problems of their respective CSUs for discussion. A friction started developing between them and our Community Workers in Clusters where the community workers were not able to adjust fast enough or where they were not able to give an intellectual and analytical leadership, their positions were being threatened. These conflicts became quite open in Billur and Kondireddipalli centres. In Aiavarapalli Cluster the Community Worker openly expressed his resentment against his opinions being questioned and even by passed by the Coolies in the Cluster Meets.

We were able to contain these resentments by discussing them quite frankly and openly in the Saturday Meetings of the group. It was recognised that though democratisation, decentralisation and participation were noble objects to pursue they were often difficult to accept in reality. Yet, a consensus agreeing that our leadership must be restricted to offering theoretical and analytical clarity alone, while on it those actually from the Coolie class should aspire for and be encouraged to develop organisational leadership was being arrived at. But this consensus never materialised.

Though Cluster Meets became a regular feature in the Coolie Sanghas, we did not stop conceptualising on the legal status and structure of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA, guaranteeing its continuity even after the organisational withdrawal of ADATS the midwife organisation.

After months of discussions with the Representatives and with individual Coolies and also because of requirements of the Dairy Development Project we started in 1984, the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha was conceived of, with 2 important objectives:

- BCS would be the economic development organisation of the Coolies of Bagepalli Taluk.
- BCS would be the umbrella organisation under whose structure the BCS (the mass organisation) would function.

All the Coolies from the 30 CSUs are to be members of the General Body of BCS. Their 90 elected Representatives form the Executive Body. The Governing Body has permanent members.

The Executive Body evaluates and assesses progress, takes decisions, plans ahead, evolves policies, etc. and makes specific recommendations to the Governing Body. These recommendations have to be ratified by the Governing Body which need not accept any or all such recommendations. But at the same time the Governing Body cannot take decisions on policy or on finance matters without a specific recommendation from the Executive Body. There by the Governing Body becomes a watchdog to ensure checks and controls and the Executive and the Governing Bodies become totally and mutually dependent on each other.

The members of BCS would in fact, be the members of the village CSUs. In this way a formality was given to BCS without making it a formal body. The village CSUs worked under the structural umbrella of BCS.

Charts were made, the VLWs and Representatives explained the BCS structure in minute detail and all the Coolies of all 30 CSUs informed We got back many feedback suggestions which were incorporated into the final structure (described above) And a final decision was

taken to allow BCS to function exactly as described above but without the Coolies actually, legally, becoming members for a 2 year trial period.

Today, we find that there is hardly anything in the BCS structure that needs changing. We are going ahead with the registration formalities of the BCS and feel that the date of formalising and legalising the status of the Coolies in the General Body and of the Representatives in the Executive Body can be advanced.

We are optimistic on the BCS because of a very positive development that took place in 1985. It was prompted by the fact that 4 of our Community Workers resigned in December 1984 and ADATS rejected the group concept, recognising itself as a midwife organisation with a slightly longer role to work in many more villages of the taluk.

The idea of monthly BCS Meeting every first Saturday of the month suddenly caught the imagination of the Coolies. 6 BCS Meetings have been held in 1985 and not even one of them has had the characteristics of a training session where we did all the talking.

Attendance of these BCS Meetings had been steadily increasing. In addition to the 90 elected Representatives from the CSUs and the 30 VLWs who are now designated as CSU Secretaries many others have started coming on a regular basis from villages that ADATS had not even visited! For the 7 September '85 BCS Meeting these uninvited but welcome guests numbered 70! When asked they say that they have formed CSUs in their village are the elected representatives and have been asked by their Coolies to go to Bagepalli every first Saturday. Identical structures to what ADATS has developed for the Coolies over a past nearly 8 years are being imitated by the Coolies by themselves, sans Cluster Meets.

A perusal of the Minutes Book of the Cluster Meets and the BCS Meeting gives the answer as to why the BCS suddenly caught the imagination of the Coolies these past months:

"All these days ADATS had its people (the community workers) in our villages. They were from middle and rich peasant backgrounds and ADATS expected them to work for us Coolies. So we had decided that the Coolie Sanghas were not our affairs, but ADATS! Now these fellows have left... today we feel that the Coolie Sanghas are ours. ADATS has become realistic. What BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA did they think we could build when covering just 30 of the taluk's 200 villages? Now, ADATS is talking about expansion to soon cover the whole taluk.

"ADATS is their organisation. The Coolie Sangha is ours. Let us have a marriage."

The decision to not replace the resigned Community Workers and to hand over all responsibilities of decision making, supervision, etc. to the Coolie Sangha structures the CSUs, the Cluster Meets and the BCS has tremendously helped develop a confidence in the Coolies that we are serious and mean business. Also having elected CSU Secretaries and Cluster Secretaries to note the minutes, etc. etc. even though in most cases these are our VLWs. But the Coolies have been wise to not appoint the non Coolie VLWs as Secretaries of their CSUs or Clusters.

In 10 CSUs we have withdrawn even the VLWs and reappointed them as Community Workers to work in the new villages of the Expansion Programme. The most important consideration when doing this was whether the Coolies and their Representatives themselves felt confident of handling their CSUs without anybody from ADATS. Here again, ADATS has been able to beat the deadline of withdrawal by more than a year – it had been originally envisaged that the CSUs would be in such a state of maturity only by December 1986.

Though all these Community Workers and Village Level Workers withdrawal has meant a slight increase in the number of support Staff like Extension Worker and Desk Worker in the central office, we believe that this is not quite the same in terms of Coolie participation in running these programme.

Now that we have introduced economic projects into our work, the Coolies surely need support from technical and managerial expert Staff. But these services should not be exclusive and alienating. That is why the DDP for example, we insisted that one of the important functions of our Veterinarian would be to train para veterinary workers or "barefoot vets". We have also sent all the Coolies in villages where crossbred are given for managerial training to Government farms at Hessarghatta and our central dairy at Bagepalli. This skill training has been emphasised these past 2½ years.

All the central office support Staff like the Extension Workers and Desk Workers have been made to understand the importance of this practical skill training for the Coolies. Coolies have been involved in just about any and every activity that they can be involved in. In the last weeks of 1984 it was they who arranged tuition for the children getting ready for their annual examinations, they arranged a children's festival at Bagepalli got clothes stitched for all the programme children, etc.

But we realise that there are certain functions that are beyond the capacity of even neo-literate Coolies. Even then the central charts, planners, ledgers, systems etc. should not be alienating for them. Therefore we have started inviting the Representatives in small batches for a week at a time to just be in the office and familiarise themselves. The Accounts Admn. Assistant has taken the responsibility to thus acquaint/train the Coolies in this manner.

But the most important skill training we have imparted has not been through either formal or informal classes:

In Nakkalapalli and Somnathpura CSUs the Coolies were encouraged to build their own Janata House by taking loans from the Bank to build 4 and 7 houses respectively. Normally the Government builds these houses free of cost for the poor using Contractors. In addition to avoiding the Contractors cuts and bettering quality these 2 small economic projects have imparted a lot of construction and money management skills in the Representatives of these 2 villages. Today these CSUs are talking about demanding more Government contacts to be given to their CSUs instead of to Contractors. Some months back these same Coolies would not have dared to think that it was in their capacity to execute construction works by themselves.

In Nagarlu CSU a persistent struggle with Canara Bank eventually resulted in 4 low interest, long term, house loans being sanctioned to 4 Coolies on the CSU are executing the work very much to the Bank's satisfaction. Once again Nagarlu is a village where the Coolies did not dream that they possessed such capacities.

In the Somnathpura Cluster where we have given nearly 30 crossbred cows under the DDP in 3 villages there is no government Milk Collection Society. So the Coolies are by themselves running a Milk Collection Centre. Coolies who are illiterate in even basic numeracy are now maintaining accounts of milk collected in decimal points, keeping a record of expenses incurred, dividing monthly expenses against the total quantity of milk collected and charging it to each person who uses the facility to sell his milk, based on the quantity of milk poured to the Centre in the month! The other day, when asked how illiterates who were so different about every aspect of life just a few years back were doing all this for over a year and a half now, even they were surprised! Today there is talk of the Government starting a Milk Collection Society at Somnathpura. There is a fair chance of the Coolies capturing this Society in the ensuing elections and the Ryots will not oppose them.

The accounts of the Coolie Credit Fund, though fairly simple are being maintained by the Coolies themselves. Only a Master Cash Book and Kardex ledgers are maintained at our Central Office. Once again the Coolies have found a solution to overcome their illiteracy – they use their children who are going to school through our children's programme to do the actual writing and trust their truly phenomenal memory for the rest!

The Coolies welcome this change from training in classrooms to training through actually executing economic projects by themselves. But they are also quick to point out that unless they have the political cadre training imparted all these years, this what is being done would have no value:

- “If we can run our own village CCF and the Cluster CCF, all we need to do is understand how the office CCF works for the whole taluk. Then we can even take over and manage Canara Bank.”
- “What’s so great in the Contractors? They have working capital in one pocket and a few tricks in another. We too have the working capital in our CCFs. All we need to do now is learn a few tricks.”
- “Before we might have had the political clout to capture our village Societies (of the Government). But afterwards we would not have known how to run it and make sure that the sugar and kerosene oil come.... now we don’t think it will be too different from our Milk Collection Centre.”

The one Community Worker who did not resign is today the Field Assistant of ADATS. He is in charge of Coolie participation and training. He attends all the Cluster Meets, organises political as well as practical training and ensures that they will be in a position to manage all the programmes of ADATS by themselves in the shortest time possible.

2. INDIVIDUAL SELF SUFFICIENCY PLANS

At the end of the evaluation by Jan and Alex, we have made an Extension Application to NOVIB for a further 3 year support till December 1986. In it we had also asked for 3 years salaries and stipends in advance so that we could all set up small dairy units and tray and earn our own living. This was because at that time we had not considered a longer life beyond 1986 for ADATS as an organisation, but believed that we were all personally committed to live on in Bagepalli taluk and find a role for ourselves as intellectual friends of the Coolies.

Though NOVIB was sympathetic to the reasons for this peculiar request, it was not possible for them to give 3 years salary and stipend moneys in advance due to certain restrictions they had on the matter. ADATS, however, managed to pay all its Community Workers and Village Level Workers 2 years salaries and stipends and also arranged bank loans so that the self sufficiency plans could go ahead.

4 Community Workers and 18 VLWs availed this facility and bought crossbred cows, after training themselves on the practical aspects of management, breeding, etc. at our central dairy and also the Government farm at Hessarghatta. Of these, 3 cows died the very next months due to the dreaded theileria disease. But the morale was still high since the Insurance Company promptly made good the losses. Another 8 more cows were subsequently given to the Village Level Workers under the DDP through the banks. They too proved to be fairly viable.

Except for 1 VLW who had to suddenly sell his cow because of a major domestic problem all these cows proved to be good sources of income. They did not cause any undue jealousy or problems in the villages because everyone saw the considerable amount of personal labour involved in their maintenance. In fact, these first cows served a very practical demonstration role in encouraging the Coolies to avail the facilities of the DDP and break the myth that crossbred cow maintenance was too complicated for Coolies to manage.

Yet, when the 4 Community Workers resigned all of a sudden in December 1984 they cited being trapped into the self sufficiency plan as one of the reasons for their resignation. Subsequently, ADATS had some problems in recovering the advances given to them for setting up these dairies and could do so only because of solid Coolie pressure.

This fairly short lived experiment at personal self sufficiency was reviewed by the ADATS Governing Body. They satisfied themselves that even if the scheme was viable and worked, the risks involved were too high, and such plans act as impediments to maintaining organisational discipline. As a result, we were asked to stop making salary advances for such purposes.

On the other hand, the Governing Body did not see the stipend advance paid to the VLWs as a problem, as long as some point of control was maintained to ensure that they continued to do work properly. Basically, the VLWs are all neo-literate Coolies from the very same villages where they are working. Making them personally self sufficient would only make it easier to attain the independence needed for ADATS organisational withdrawal from their respective villages. At the same time it was pointed out that having just one of 2 cows per VLW did not ensure levels of income required for them to maintain themselves and also work free of encumbrance.

3. FUND RAISING

Along with the Coolies, ADATS planned 6 Collective Production Units (coconut farms) to be set up one in each Cluster. This was done in order to:

- Ensure that the Coolies will be able to generate their own funds to cover the expenses of their struggles, educational, organisational and service activities.
- Set up these CPUs in such a manner that will necessitate the Coolies to meet, discuss, take decisions and manage them jointly; the coconut farms should serve as rallying points to further foster their unity and capacity for planned activities and programmes.
- Create a structure into which the CPUs will get integrated, ensuring their continuity both, as entities generating funds for the CSUs as well as in style of functioning and grassroots control.

When arguing for the CPU coconut farms, we had said:

- “Collective ventures aimed at increasing family incomes and at generating employment opportunities will not, we are convinced, succeed. We have elaborated earlier that social, economic and political realities of today’s society are opposed to the collectivisation of their private property, even if the returns from such ventures are slightly higher than their present level of earnings.”

Then we clarified:

- “Our present proposal to set up CPUs to generate funds to support the struggle of the Coolies for their humanisation and liberation from exploitative and oppressive forces should not be mixed up with the other collective ventures that we had commented on, aimed at increasing earning capacities of individual Coolies. These CPUs aim at generating funds for the organisation owned, managed and controlled by the Coolies at village, Cluster and taluk levels.”

The planning for these CPUs started in early 1984 when we started discussing the question of fund raising with the Coolies in their weekly CSU and Cluster Meets. The formation of BCS was also discussed side by side – as the organisation which would own, manage and control these CPUs. In the villages with the Dairy Development Project, the effort to increase individual earnings of Coolies was readily seen as part of BCS rather than an ADATS effort because they saw what the DDP had been, right from the start, under their control and management.

The selection of coconut farms as a suitable venture was not a result of our search, but a discovery of the Coolies themselves. Our only role was to collect diverse opinions and information from one end of the taluk to the other, initiate fresh discussions on objections, observa-

tions and concerns raised in different villages, and finally arrive at acceptable consensus on each minute detail. This proposal was the result of long, drawn out, grassroots planning exercise.

NOVIB expressed an interest in supporting this proposal but a legal complication crept in. According to the Karnataka Land Reforms Act, 1961, charitable Societies were barred from purchasing agricultural lands after 1971. We are now in the final process of finding a solution to overcome this hurdle by getting a special exemption from the Government. The Coolies are, in the meantime, understandably disappointed at the delay.

But ADATS greatest triumph in fund raising, when all other bodies in the taluk failed, was to come on 21 September 1985. We had said earlier:

“The generation and management of their own moneys, however meagre the amount, in order to finance their mass organisation without this leading to infighting, petty squabbles and politicking, would be the ultimate test of unity and the Coolies’ organisational maturity.”

The Coolies showed this organisational maturity with a vengeance the other day.

4. COOLIE PANDAGA

In September 1985, at the height of the drought, over 1,500 Coolies representing 1,043 Member Coolie families from 29 village CSUs came to Somnathpura village to celebrate, for the first time in the history of this district, a Coolie Festival.

The Kothakota Coolies hired 2 vans. The Aachepalli Coolies chartered buses. 200 Coolies from the Billur Cluster marched 20 kilometres shouting slogans and holding banners. Some came in bullock carts...

At the height of the drought, with a near total failure of the monsoons, 1,043 Coolies had contributed Rs 5 each to finance this, their festival. ADATS was in effect invited to the Pandaga by the elected CSU Representatives. The Coolies of Somnathpura Cluster who hosted this unique historical event were the only ones who were 100% sure of bringing this about. Everyone else was justifiably sceptical.

Each CSU presented an “item”. Some a small skit, some a dance. There was an inter Cluster Kabbadi match (which never got over) and the backdrop was provided by 3 tribal CSUs doing their traditional kollattam dance in coloured mirrored dresses. Mana Patalu revolutionary songs and traditional Coolie folklore blared on the mike sets while the Coolies mingled with each other, acquainting themselves to events and struggles of distant CSUs. The entire atmosphere was one of pure joy!

500 kgs of rice was cooked. Sambar (thick, with plenty of vegetables and lentils – the way you fellows make it, the Brahmin cook was ordered) boiled in 7 huge vessels, and a Payasam of jaggery, wheat and lentils just flowed. The Somnathpura Coolies had slogged day and night for a week to ensure that everything was organised properly; water had been collected for 3 days, there was not a single stone or husk in the rice, firewood collected, the eating place cordoned off to seat 400 at a time, vessels hired, the Brahmin cook hired for the day, etc. And not a single “experienced” Ryot was allowed to interfere.

The Jelipigaripalli Coolies had practised a conventional drama “Ramanjaya Yuddham” for 4 months without a single caste youth in the cast. This extremely precise musical opera was performed for 6 hours from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. Expert critics rated it as average the next day while one expressed surprise at the near perfect diction of the Shudhras!

The stage, lighting, sound system and costumes for the all night long drama were hired from a city for Rs 1,550. Over 6,000 people attended the drama on the night of 21st and 22nd September 1985.

The Reports read out by the Cluster Secretaries were received with great awe from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. when nearly 8 year struggles to build up Coolie Sangha Units in different villages were narrated. When it was my turn to speak, I was choked with emotion:

“7½ years back when I first came to Somnathpura, an old Harijana named Palaka Earappa invited me into the Harijana Colony saying, ‘My people keep on saying that they are incapable of doing anything... please do something to change this!’. Today you Coolies have achieved something that is going to go down in the history of this taluk. In the history of this district. Palaka Earappa is no more with us. But his wife and child are somewhere in this gathering. The dream and the vision of that great man has been fulfilled. If I have been instrumental in this, I feel so very satisfied...

“But what gives me the greatest joy is the fact that all of you have come. Because I know that not one woman, not one man, and not one child sitting here feels that I or my friends in ADATS have achieved all this. I know that when you get up to return to your villages by the early light of tomorrow’s dawn, you will all feel that YOU have achieved this incredible Coolie Pandaga!

“My one and only wish is that this happens every year at a different village. On the 1st of this month, ADATS has expanded to work in 60 more villages of this taluk. Today, over 2,000 Coolies have come. My wish is that next year the numbers will cross 6,000 and continue to grow!”

When the entire stage and food bills started coming in the next day, we found a sizeable deficit. ADATS very willingly cleared this debt on behalf of the Coolies.

Reactions to the phenomenal success of the Coolie Pandaga are still to come in. For the moment, the taluk is too numbed with the shock of its success. No Ryot leader had ever imagined this possible by anyone, let alone by Coolie. For the Coolies as a class, this has been one of the most significant events in their recent history.

We are seriously considering holding the General Body Meeting of the BCS every year on 1st May as a Coolie Pandaga day when the newly elected CSU Representatives can be introduced by the outgoing Representatives and the new Executive Committee of the BCS presented to the Trustees. We will make this suggestion on the 5 October 1985 BCS Meeting day for the Coolie to discuss and consider.

5. ISSUES AND STRUGGLES

In the past 2 ½ years, the Coolies have been taking up issues and struggling against exploitative and oppressive forces throughout. The change in Government after the January 1983 elections had democratised the State apparatus to a very considerable extent. The police are no more the dreaded terror that they used to be. Officials do not move with impunity. Ostentatious displays of political power is absent. The very fragile majority of the ruling Janata Party ensures all this. But this very same fragile majority coupled with their basic capitalist ideology prevents them from becoming too populist in their measures. It also prevents them from taking any radical steps to eradicate disparities. By their own admission of the other day, the gulf between the urbanites and the rural poor is widening to dangerous, unbridgeable spans.

While aspirations of the Coolies is steadily on the rise, there is very little that is or can be done to satisfy this increased expectation. The work of ADATS only aggravates this situation, but within perfectly legal and law abiding parameters. This does not make up particularly popular with either the ruling party, the bureaucracy, or the Ryots. Due to our critical 2Peasant approach and working with the 3 principles of political unity, social neutrality and economic contradiction between the Coolie and Ryot classes, we do not find favour in the ranks of the

organised Left either. It is, in fact, our intellectual commitment along with the native wisdom of the Coolies that accounts for our continued, unwelcome alliance with the loose Left opposition in the taluk. And the fact that this opposition is no more an opposition, but an ally of the ruling front in Karnataka makes it increasingly more tempting to claim an apolitical perspective; a stance which we know to be dangerous, counterproductive and useless in the long run.

It is in this backdrop of forces of intellectual corruption and seductive easy way outs that ADATS has continued its work for the past 2½ years, making our work all the more difficult and painstaking. We have had to continually counsel the Coolies and clarify phenomena that they know to be true but do not know how.

Having economic projects to implement, targets to reach and services to deliver promptly and efficiently took its toll very heavily in terms of time and energy. Emphasising on academics to try and attain a class-by-standard learning level in our 454 Coolie children in 22 villages took its share. And introducing the new organisational structure of ADATS and Coolies of Bagepalli taluk, formalising membership, meetings, minuting and procedures of the CSU Meetings, Cluster Meets and BCS Meetings was a Herculean task we took upon ourselves.

The handing over of increased responsibilities to the Coolies was thrust upon us by the untimely resignation of 4 Community Workers. Following through the grassroots planning exercise with the initiation of the Coolie Credit Funds (CCFs) in villages with a negative bank balance and establishing it as an alternate credit system in the villages could never have been done without the support of unconditional friends who thought us made but still supported. And we stuck with stubborn determination to our target dates for organisational withdrawal from 10 villages and the starting of the Expansion Programme into 60 more.

For all this, we are sincerely grateful to the 1,043 Member Coolie families of 29 CSUs who alone fully recognised the propitious moment and shared our zeal. We also wish to record our deep and profound gratitude for the grand finale of comradeship, trust and affection they showed us by successfully celebrating the Coolie Pandaga.

5.1. Jelipigaripalli Wage Strike

The CSU at Jelipigaripalli has a strength of about 45 families. The prevailing wage in the area was either Rs 3 or 2 measures of grain. In early 1984 all the Ryots conceived a plan. They pooled all the reserve grain in the house of the village elder and declared it to be a shop. They pleaded their inability to pay wages in kind, saying that they had no grain, using the perpetual drought as an excuse.

The next days, Jelipigaripalli Coolies took their daily wage of Rs 3 to the one and only, newly created, grain shop in the village. To their astonishment they found that the monopoly price of grain had gone up to Rs 2 per measure and that their wages had been reduced in real terms, to 1½ measures. When they protested, the Ryots shammed their inability to do anything about this.

After a week's hectic meetings and discussions, against every odd, the Jelipigaripalli wage strike was started. This is a struggle that will go down in the history of the taluk as one of the longest, toughest struggles yet undertaken by anyone.

Very soon the strike led to the Coolies being socially boycotted in the village; the strikers strength reduced to 23 families; the police intervened to threaten them but extreme maturity and level headedness on the part of the CSU Representatives converted this intervention to their favour; the labour inspector intervened luke warmly on the Coolies' behalf; the local CPI(M) MLA visited the village, was unable to convince the Ryots who were his followers of 35 years and made a historical break with them, pleading his inability to do anything but en-

couraging the Coolies to continue the strike; local left peasant leaders assembled at Jelipigaripalli to break the strike but once again the CSU Representatives managed to change their position, the Janata Government was asked to intervene, but our CPI(M) MLA clarified the issue at the highest level; the local Congress I refused to take sides; the strike continued...

In terms of sheer suffering, the Coolies of Jelipigaripalli went through hell. Only in the most acute stage when labour was just not available in the surrounding villages, roots exhausted, that ADATS helped the strikers with 3 bags of rice and Rs 1,000 to start their own petty shop (which got pauperised very soon). After 1 full year, the Ryots gave up. When they agreed to pay Rs 4 or 2 measures of grain as daily wages, the Coolies refused to accept and demanded Rs 5 in cash alone (i.e. without the grain option). The strike continued for another week before the Ryots accepted total and complete defeat.

In the meantime, the Jelipigaripalli Coolies established a rapport with Coolies and decent Ryots of about 25 surrounding villages and laid the foundation for the ADATS Expansion Programme into 60 more villages. They practiced the famous drama which was enacted on the night of 21st and 22nd September during the Coolie Pandaga. They conducted cadre training for Coolies from surrounding villages. They helped us set up the new organisational structure of the Coolie Sangha. They enrolled many non Harijans from Jelipigaripalli into the CSU, on the explicit advise of the MLA. They went around settling inter-Coolie disputes in the surrounding villages. In short, literally on empty stomachs, more than 20 Coolie families – men as well as women – did solid mass organisation work in the area. In every village they visited, they were received with warmth and fed. But most importantly, they taught us at ADATS the meaning of struggle.

The other day, I took a friend of ours to visit the Coolies of Jelipigaripalli. We were speaking in Telugu when I told the visitor that their struggle lasted a year. An elderly Harijana, Pedda Gangulappa, retorted, “What one year? You know nothing about strikes! A strike lasts for ever, it is a way of life.”

5.2. Kothakota Teacher

When the school year started in 1985, 52 school going Coolie children were supplied with note books under our Children’s Programme. The text books were to be supplied by the school teachers as part of the new scheme introduced by the Janata Government. But the teacher at the Kothakota Government School demanded a bribe of one 200 page note book per child in order to give the Marks Card of the previous exams – and the text books. The parents of these 52 children and the CSU Representatives tried to persuade the teacher to desist, but he acted very high handed and arrogant. Their many representations to the taluk authorities were treated with contempt. Finally they all collected the fare and travel expenses and sent a delegation to Bangalore to meet with the Education Minister. He promised immediate action and they returned.

The Coolies waited for some more days but nothing happened. They intensified their agitation at Bagepalli, made the children boycott classes, and finally got the teacher transferred. The Kothakota Coolies followed this up by relating this teacher’s antecedents to the villages of his new posting and got them to represent that they did not want him. Today this Teacher has been posted as a Clerk in the Taluk Education Office, but the Officer is not prepared to accept him.

5.3. Venkatappanaiakana Kunta

To the north of Nagarlu village is a rainfed tank that has traditionally been used as a water hole for cattle, sheep and goats. The bund of this tank breached and the PWD Engineers promptly made a plan and estimate to repair it. But for 2 years this work was postponed be-

cause of pressure from a feudal landlord from another village who had begun cultivating the fertile alluvial silt of the tank bed.

When pressed to act, the PWD claimed that the Nagarlu Coolies could not get the work executed because no Contractor would come forward to repair the breach for fear of alienating the landlord and his influential friends.

As soon as the Janata came to power, the Nagarlu Coolies went to the MLA and got the work sanctioned. They personally worked on the breach repair and set the tank right once again. In the meantime, many cattle have perished for want of drinking water the previous years.

5.4. Billur Gram Sabha

As part of the populist loan giving spree, the Central and State Governments have introduced the IRDP and Anthyodaya schemes to give heavily subsidised, low interest loans to the rural poor. In order to select the beneficiaries, Gram Sabhas are to be held at each Cluster village. The Village Secretary is supposed to inform the date of the Gram Sabha to all the people well in advance so that they could all together themselves identify beneficiaries in front of the Government officials.

As is the normal case, this procedure was short circuited and a sham Gram Sabha was held at Billur. When we went to attend their weekly Cluster Meet, the Coolies told us that deserving people had not been given loans, that their CSU Representatives had not been allowed to speak, etc.

We have a thorough hearing to what they had to say and then asked what we could do. They had no answers. Then we said:

“We are actually glad that this has happened. The reason why so many of the Gram Sabhas, including yours, are a sham is because you fellows do not know how to speak, what to speak. You see a Government official and you tremble! You loose your tongues! How can you know your rights and responsibilities in a meeting you are invited to when you have never attended a meeting of any sort in your lives? This is the very first Cluster Meet where we find such a packed attendance. And that is because your hearts are burning that you did not get those loans. If you attend these Coolie Sangha meetings, then you will know the procedure and how to present your point of view in any other meeting. Otherwise stay as goats and sheep!

Till that day in early 1985, Billur showed no promise as a Cluster with a strong Coolie Sangha movement. But this firing irked them into action.

The Gram Sabha was reconvened after a long struggle involving many Representatives and a long march to Bagepalli. It was held to everyone's satisfaction. And nowadays the Coolie Sangha meetings are better attended.

5.5. Other struggles

We are reporting only 4 typical struggles taken up by the Coolies in the past 2 ½ years. Jelipigaripalli has not been the only wage strike. It is not only in Kothakota or in Nagarlu that erring officials or vulgar landlords have been put in place. But it is not possible to narrate all the struggles, big and small, that the Coolies have undertaken in the past 30 months. Each and every one of them has contributed to furthering the organisational strength and maturity of the Coolies at their CSU and Cluster levels.

Taluk level issues have been studiously avoided and the Coolie Pandaga was the first major show of strength they dared to venture. No amount of persuasion has convinced them that they do have the strength to take up general taluk level issues of wages and corruption. Perhaps the Coolies are better than us in gauging opportune moments.

The transfer of powers from ADATS Staff and group members who were essentially from non Coolie class backgrounds to illiterate and neo-literate Coolies has not been without confusion and conflict. The culture of poverty and the need to be subjugated, commanded to and ordered has been internalised in a large majority of Coolies, to the extent of often wishing to not have decision making powers, not want responsibilities, and to prefer to deal with a greater, richer, father figure than to a gathering of equals.

I, personally, have had to continually impress upon the Coolies that I do not desire to develop individual relationships with any Coolies at a personal level; that I do not wish to profit with popularity or a good name. And this has been very difficult for me. Because the breaking of traditional Patron Client relationships cause deep hurt and a deeper sense of betrayal. We have lost some very sincere Coolies in the process, and this has caused me torturous sleepless nights. I confess having often wondered if we were on the right path; whether democratic structures, values and norms did in fact have the solution at all. Whether we had the right to snatch away the comfort that dependencies brought to an alienated poor. The total shock, surprise and disbelief at what we have been doing, specially in the Coolies who are certainly not going to be able to understand in spite of umpteen training sessions and convincing, is pathetic to see. These are the turmoil of change, and I have understood and shared this pain with the Coolies.

In each CSU is a creative minority. Sometimes it is in the CSU Representatives. Sometimes it is, unexpectedly, a wise old man like the late Palaka Earappa of Somnathpura. They are the ones who dare to visualise and shed the comfortable cocoons that exploitative feudal relations spin up. They are the ones who are the vanguards of true democracy. And they are the ones who prevent people like me from searching for excuses to put off necessary and healthy developments like organisational withdrawal. The strikers of Jelipigaripalli are a good example of these heroes.

Others, including the 4 Community Workers who resigned from ADATS 10 months back, have been making capital of this confusion and conflict, making the work of the VLWs and the elected CSU Representatives extremely difficult. They have been the prophets of doom at times, spreading malicious rumours at other times, and generally sowing divisive seeds all the time. It is difficult to pass judgements on the victims of their malice and dub them simplistically as opportunistic or greedy or untrustworthy or whatever.

The Yellampalli CSU and Maravapalli CSU are good examples. 83 Coolie families of Yellampalli have been ostracised by the BCS for having acted shabbily during the past difficult 10 months. They 40 odd tribal Coolie families of Maravapalli Thanda have had all ADATS benefits like the Children's Programme, CCF, etc. cut off largely by their own making. In both villages, the Coolies have been victims of malicious manipulation by the 4 Community Workers who left us and chose to work against ADATS and the Coolie Sangha. These are not black and white problems and so solutions have to be found in shades of grey.