

## 0117. Special Progress Report on Gulur Hobli (Dec 1989)

*Describes the altered political economy of Gulur hobli, and then gives a report on the ADATS/EZE Project No: 86061 from 1987 to 1989*

In an attempt to capture the experiences and record learning that has taken place in Gulur Hobli of Bagepalli taluk, where ADATS' involvement using the Coolie Sangha Model of development is now nearly three and a half years old, we bring forth this Special Report.

This Report is being presented in four Sections. In Section 1 we have tried to make a statement on the political economy of Gulur Hobli based on the Coolies' own perception of societal reality. Sections 2 and 3 go on to report on the two projects which we have implemented in the Hobli. The standards which we have set for ourselves when making this appraisal are far more severe than the critical objectivity of any outsider can ever be, because of the vantage position that we have enjoyed as insiders, factually and intuitively aware of each and every shortcoming in both, our efforts as well as Coolie responses. Section 4 starts with a discussion on decentralisation, autonomy and pluralism and spells out some of the priority areas that we will concentrate on in the next three year Coolie Sangha Formalisation phase of our involvement in the Hobli.

### 1. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GULUR HOBLI

The making of an academic statement on the political economy of society, using our own knowledge base and conventional tools for analysis is an exercise aimed at merely interpreting reality and giving it a recognisable name or title.

The arriving at an alternate understanding based on an interpretation of the struggle of its oppressed and exploited people, using their knowledge base and wisdom, results in a call for altered prioritisation and for forging new class alliances, abandoning the old. It becomes a call for fundamental and meaningful societal change.

#### 1.1. The attempt to see society from the Coolies' viewpoint

To attempt at a statement on the political economy of a small speck within the nation state India is an endeavour in folly which, nevertheless, has to be undertaken if we are to make an honest inquiry into the relevance of our involvement as interventionists. We realise that the lives, struggle and experiences of those actually involved in the business of living in a situation is the most authentic statement of this kind.

The main contradiction in the villages of Gulur is between the Coolies and the *Ryots*. Both have their own distinctly separate and conflicting interpretations of contemporary reality, based on their respective world views. One reason why development workers like ourselves have chosen to go along with the Coolie ideology is, quite honestly, emotional. We have seen that the other ideology possesses justifications for a continuation of abject poverty in the countryside and perpetuate misery for a majority of its population. It is no different from the centuries old feudal value system propounded by the Landlords. We see landlordism, as an ideology, alive and kicking in the values, characteristics and behavioural patterns of the *Ryots* and therefore reject their views and interpretations of the world.

The other, more exciting reason for our flirtation with the Coolie ideology is because we glimpse in it the essence of solutions for some of the most serious societal problems facing our generation. We see that their world view, in this sense, is an expanding and all embracing one which does not restrict itself to a narrow agenda of self development.

We will therefore attempt to trace, as the Coolies perceive it, two facets of this contradiction where the State consciously intervenes and deliberately influences the pace and outcome of their class struggle through the enactment of social laws on the one side, and the execution of petty contract works on the other. To do this we will examine the dichotomous relationship that the *Ryots* have with the State and the dangerous consequences that this has for Indian democracy as a whole, and the body polity in the countryside in particular.

Then we will try to understand the State itself, once again using the perception, knowledge base and world view of the Coolies by seeing how they view institutions like elections, the police and government officials. Finally we will try to unravel the reasons for the dextrous manner in which the Coolies treat the so-called neutral population, intuitively realising that it is their opinions which accurately mirror the view point of the State in spite of all the confusing signals that it deliberately sends out.

In this manner we will be able to analyse the situation as it exists, theorise upon it and derive applicable conclusions from our reading of the political economy of the Hobli.

In the last paragraphs of this Section we will depart from Gulur Hobli and expand our inquiry with a description of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA as an expression of how an undisciplined mass of disunited poor people transform themselves into a conscientised and politicised class of Coolies, cutting across parochial caste and gender lines, when a serious and viable opportunity is provided to them. Our own role in this process, as members of the bourgeois intelligentsia who have chosen to accompany the Coolies, is neither exaggerated nor glossed over in any false humility.

## 1.2. The extent of ADATS involvement in Gulur Hobli

Gulur is one of the five Hoblis of Bagepalli taluk in Kolar district, Karnataka. The Hobli covers a hilly region of Bagepalli taluk which is historically noted for its *Ryot* agitation under the aegis of Left forces. This has resulted in one faction the middle peasantry being comparatively united in the villages of Gulur. Unfortunately the original agenda of their unity, which was to confront the bourgeois State, has long been abandoned. It has, instead, slithered over the years into a cunning used to cheat, oppress and exploit the Coolies in far more a brutal manner than did the Landlords of yore.

*Ryots*, apart from finding in this a vent for expressing their frustrations which were dangerously coupled with a reactionary organisational capacity, also found it very profitable to bully and maintain a gangster like grip on each and every facet of the Hobli's life, the chief among them being the plight of the Coolies. This is what has kept a dying class and obsolete economics afloat, for at least one faction of the middle peasantry, till the advent of the Coolie Sangha.

ADATS commenced working in this Hobli with EZE support in September 1986. Politically strong CSUs have been built in fifty four villages comprising ten Clusters. A massive three year Dry Land Development Project (DLDP) has been introduced in the GEP area from March 1988 to give meaningful employment to one person from each Member Coolie family for five summer months every year. This programme aims to develop about 3,700 acres of virgin and under-utilised, highly eroded dry land hugging the hills and belonging to the Member Coolies. An alternate, interest-free credit giving programme which was developed by the Coolies in the older villages was introduced in the GEP area with a high degree of success.

## 1.3. *Ryots* and Coolies

A total of about 4,707 households live in the 54 villages of Gulur Hobli where as many Coolie Sangha Units have been built up in the past three and a half years.

About 80% of them are agricultural labourers, self employed small peasants, artisans, petty traders, small shop keepers, and destitute persons like the chronically sick, aged and widows. This large chunk of the population who do not employ wage labour and who come from a wide array of different castes and communities, who possess an average of 3.6 acres of dry land, refer to themselves as Coolies. But such a reductionist definition of Coolie, based on a very narrow economic interpretation of the term class, would be wholly incomplete, inapplicable and misleading as we shall soon see.

A handful of the population, comprising of less than 2 or 3 persons for every group of villages, are rich farmers who have capitalised their agriculture, have a high social standing in the caste hierarchy, and base their returns more on increased investment of capital and technology rather than on stark exploitation.

The remaining 15 to 20% of Gulur's population are the middle peasants, popularly referred to as the *Ryots*. These *Ryots* have holdings of 5 to 25 acres of dry land along with 3 to 10 acres of wet land each. They belong to the middle and upper castes and their sons are often educated upto a pre-university level while their daughters have to be content with a primary or middle schooling.

The population of the Hobli is also vertically divided, as in any other part of the country, on party lines. These divisions are created by inter-*Ryot* competitions for State subsidy leading to one faction drifting towards a particular political party for its patronage and protection, and thereby forcing its rival faction to opt for the other. Caste considerations often play a role in causing these village level inter-*Ryot* rivalries in the first place. So it is not uncommon to see a particular political party associated with a certain caste in a region. The Reddys or Kapus of Gulur, for example, belong to the Communists while all the remaining castes are with the Congress.

The genesis for the caste communisation of election politics in these regions is to be found in this above description of *Ryot*-Coolie relations. It is not, as is fashionable in certain pseudo-intellectual sections, the result of any deliberate or conscious choice made by the national parties at their highest level. If fault is to be found with the electoral strategies of these national parties, and the blame for the rise in communal tensions is sought to be laid at their feet, then we have to make a criticism of their not recognising class conflict in the countryside and refusal to take an unambiguous stand by the side of the Coolies.

#### 1.4. *Ryots*

Though many *Ryots* in Gulur attempt at a limited capitalisation of their agriculture through the going in for commercial crops like rainfed groundnut, the keeping of a few cross-bred cows, the growing of mulberry and rearing of silkworms, etc. theirs is still a faltering peasant economy, unable to meet even their most basic needs. All that their attempts at "modernisation" have achieved is to trap them in the worst aspects of a market economy which they neither understand nor have the political strength to cope with.

Many factors contribute to this pauperisation process whereby *Ryots* constantly keep slipping into the ranks of the small and poor peasantry. The division of their marginally viable holdings amongst brothers is one. Their obstinate refusal to reinvest in other forms of entrepreneurship is another. But a total lack of bargaining power vis-à-vis the State, specially in relation to questions relating to remunerative prices and access to easy and subsidised capital is the chief factor which contributes to middle peasant pauperisation.

The reason for this has to be found in the shameless coopting of their Left led mass organisation, the *Ryot Sangha*, into the bourgeois democratic agenda and process that the party itself has slipped into. Participation in electoral battles in order to provide a platform for a few *Ryot* leaders who have been unable to obtain it in any other bourgeois forum has taken prominence

over the *Ryot Sangha's* original objective of being a lobby in favour of middle peasant grievances. But what the *Ryot Sangha* lacks in terms of courage, organisation and discipline to struggle against the bourgeois State, it has in abundance to fall upon hapless Coolies who form a convenient outlet for its disgruntled members to vent their frustration and feelings of desperation.

True middle peasant class characteristic in Gulur Hobli is thereby portrayed through the sporadic outbursts of senseless violence and mayhem that they let loose from time to time against the Coolies, even though the *Ryots* gain no tangible benefits from these assertions of a false superiority. It is almost as if domination becomes an end in itself when material solution is nowhere in sight for a class of people caught in the dusty cobwebs of a dying feudal order and economy, and cheated by its own lust for a power that they can never hope to taste.

These characteristics define the classes of Gulur Hobli in a more holistic and applicable manner when making an analysis of societal relations than any narrow compartmentalised understanding which seeks to find identities for the various groups that comprise village society based on land holding, income levels, or any other isolated economic indicator.

## 1.5. *Ryots and the State*

### 1.5.1. THE CONTRADICTION WHICH LEADS TO A DUAL RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between the *Ryots* of Gulur and the State shows a strange and at first inexplicable contradiction. On the one hand, the State opposes the *Ryots* by supporting the Coolies through social laws that emphasise the liberation of the small and poor peasants from their clutches. On the other hand, the same State subsidises their faltering economy, making the continuation of their existence as a class possible, albeit with the same problems and uncertainties.

Any attempt to understand this contradiction has to take the larger political economy of the country into consideration where the ruling bourgeoisie have, irrespective of the political party in power, undertaken an ambitious agenda of rapid industrialisation of a nation and population whose raw economic base is still rural and agricultural. Then we can identify two considerations that pull as forces in totally opposite directions.

Economic considerations spurred by the agenda of rapid industrialisation in the urban pockets, demand that the middle peasantry in rural India be destroyed as a class because they represent a feudal relic which by definition is regressive and opposed to change. At the same time it is so vital to have peace and order in the countryside when pursuing this difficult task of rapid industrialisation. Political considerations therefore demand that this same middle peasant class be retained for some more time and entrusted with the task of keeping tranquillity.

The occasional displays of displeasure that the middle peasantry indulges in is the price that the national bourgeoisie is prepared to pay for asking it to be a strong ballast that will retain, even if false, sense of peace and order in the villages. The *Ryots*, the bourgeoisie fools itself into thinking, are in this sense living on borrowed time. But as we shall see in the next subsection, it is the whole of society and democracy in particular that pays the price for this basically dishonest and dichotomous relationship that the State cultivates with the *Ryots*.

### 1.5.2. THE EXECUTION OF PETTY CONTRACT WORKS

*Ryots* substitute their failing cultivation economy with this State financed extra-agricultural activity. They vie with each other to get petty contract works awarded for the maintenance of village roads, strengthening of tank bunds, etc. Similarly, they go to great length and pain to get their fingers into the anti-poverty schemes of the government so that they can be the ones

to build the low cost houses for the poor, procure sheep and goats for bank loanees, raise saplings for social forestry programmes, etc. in order to make a sizeable profit.

The threat of not getting petty contract works to execute effectively thwart *Ryot* agitation and subdues expressions of disgruntlement to the level of friendly debates when confronted with those personalities of the State who are endowed with the power to award petty contracts.

No individual *Ryot*, however militant in his motivation, can afford to be blacklisted by the BDO officials or the PWD engineers. Not only will this will adversely effect his income, but it would also result in some other *Ryot* from the same village being able to grab these same works, make a profit, and hold a sway over the Coolies he employs in order to execute these contract works.

The Left led *Ryot* Sangha in Gulur Hobli has degenerated into a faction which assists its members to bargain with the personages of the State and get contract works awarded to them.

### 1.5.3. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL LAWS

On the surface of their claim, the altruistic pretensions of social laws purport to positively effect the societal position of the Coolies vis-à-vis the *Ryots*. But at the same time they seem to abandon the Coolies to a terrible loneliness when they are pitted against these *Ryots*, in the midst of concrete issues and struggles.

While these laws can be actualised by a conscientised and organised rural poor to initiate self liberation processes, at the same time they also work in a very subtle and intricate manner to rob the poor of the affection and sympathy that they earlier obtained from the uninvolved “neutral” population. More detailed elaboration on this is to be found in ADATS’ papers entitled, “The Political Economy of Bagepalli taluk” and “Vision of 2000 - an era of misguidedness”.

In addition to all her other problems, Gulur is no exception to those feelings of jealousy and social antagonism that seem to be deliberately provoked between the Coolies and the *Ryots*, instilling in each a deep dread of the other and fostering feelings of insecurity that force both to turn to the protection and arbitration of the very same State which accentuated these friction in the first place.

Nor is Gulur any different from the rest of the taluk where the State’s pronunciations and the interpretations of these very same gestures by its own official apparatus is at loggerheads. What makes the situation in Gulur particularly tragic is that due to the opportunistic role played by the Left led *Ryot* Sangha, these friction quickly drift toward the violent because an undecided and incompetent State apparatus is unable to take hard decisions, make firm choices or even offer any meaningful protection to life and property - a confusion that has its genesis in the double and dubious intent of the policy makers.

### 1.6. Consequences of this dual relationship on the body polity

The double faced and simultaneous relationship of opposition and support between the State and the *Ryots* has a subtle but far reaching implication for the polity of the countryside. For any democracy to function properly, a differentiation has to be maintained between the State and Civic structures. While the former obtains a mandate in order to interpret the will and mood of the electorate and accordingly formulate policies and enacts laws, the latter is entrusted with the task of implementing these directional guidelines through fitting schemes and measures that are situationally relevant.

Implicit in this differentiation is, therefore, an acceptance of the limitations of the schema and logic of the concept of leadership itself, a confession that Leaders are not elected as true Representatives of the people, but rather as individuals and groups who have the professional competence and in whom the electorate have sufficient faith to entrust the job of formulating

policies and enacting laws that are true interpretations of their wishes. The task of implementing these through their own Representatives who sit in the Civic institutions is kept by the electorate for themselves. Any mixing or merging of these roles will result in democracy being less than representative or participatory.

It was for this reason that elections to local civic bodies were initially kept out of the purview of political parties. The party politicisation of local bodies, with the lame excuse that the reality of the situation had to be recognised and party tickets be given to the contestants, was a gross and blatant departure not just from healthy norms and conventions, but also from the very safety valve that a democracy based on the concept of leadership had in order to save itself. This is what is today being realised when the whole country laments about the eroding of political processes that gave the people a say and prevented them from seeking alternate recourse outside the democratic framework.

The result has been to give legitimacy to a new breed of gangster politician in the countryside, the Village Tout, who has neither the ability to lead nor the qualities to represent. All political parties, irrespective of their colour or conviction, are today forced to depend on this new breed of politician and rely on his shady tactics in order to appropriate the necessary numbers in their game to grab power.

And finally, the eroding into this deliberately maintained differentiation will also, as is already happening in the country, inevitably lead to a glossing over of the other differentiation between the State and the Bureaucracy, and the State and the Judiciary, all in a warped misconstruing of the need to subject everyone to the supposed will of an abstract people.

## 1.7. Coolies and the State

The local legislator, police officers and government officials comprise, in the ordinary Coolies' perception, the personalities of the State. The rest of the personages are all far away, engaged in an age old game for power, in which there are winners as well as losers.

While distancing themselves from institutions like elections with a frustratingly cynical detachment, the Coolies at the same time possess an uncanny ability to make an accurate and deeply perceptive assessment of the mood of the State by gauging the reactions of the so-called middle class in order to determine just how far they will be tolerated in taking their day to day struggle against the Ryots.

### 1.7.1. COOLIES AND ELECTIONS

At election time, the Coolies consider themselves as outsiders roped into a competition of numbers between the contesting candidates. They therefore exhibit the same passion and involvement as would, for example, a steed in battle. The same froth in the mouth and temporary exuberance that is washed down and away with a cool drink at the end of the event.

Electoral battles are fought by the lucky few who are resourceful enough to get party tickets after they give assurances to the less fortunate village touts that they would be awarded contract works in return for votes pulled in. This gives the local *Ryots* a carte blanche during the campaign to do just about anything they deem fit in order to entice or even terrorise the population into voting for their respective mentors. Once the elections are over the chief role that the legislator has in the constituency is to award contract works to these supporters. The other facets of his political personality that were bathed in the glow of bourgeois liberalism that flowed from his party's stand and manifesto during the campaign are soon forgotten.

The above is not a description of the tactic of any one particular political party but is the rule that governs all electoral strategies of each and every party, bourgeois or revolutionary, cadre based or otherwise. The absence of an intimate knowledge of the classes in the countryside, the lack of a dependable social database, the obsession to get a majority in the legislative

body by fair means or foul, without a realisation that the means determine the end, all contribute to this free-for-all electioneering. Consequently, any examining of the true intent or real purpose of any particular Leader or party just does not matter since they are already restricted in the choice of what they can do after obtaining power by the manner in which they went about getting it in the first place.

There is a fresh beginning of the stale old reality once every five years with the ushering in of a new government amidst a lot of fanfare. Promises and declarations made with a sincerity couched in the most liberal of bourgeois reasoning and sentiments do not move the Coolies into hope or expectations. When these promises are quickly followed with an active financial support being given to subsidise the weakening *Ryots* just when their faltering economies are about to collapse and they have to give up their unfair and unjust superiority over the Coolies, the latter are neither surprised nor do they retire from the contest. For the Coolies, struggle with the *Ryots* is truly a way of life.

Never are elections a referendum between differing points of view, choices between contradicting policies, or even an opining of deeply held convictions. Rarely do we witness an exception to this cynical distancing of the Coolies from a process in which they feel compelled to play nothing more than an opportunistic role and have less than faith in. And even then it is only because they are stirred with a deep passion of either support or resentment for or against one or the other contesting personages - the charismatic personality of the moment who happens to lead a particular party.

This scenario may be a true and accurate description of any corner of the parliamentary democratic world. But to the liberal bourgeois intellectualism inherent in the social workers who have chosen to accompany the Coolies, it gives cause for a deep frustration bordering on the desperate because we see in the Coolies' attitude a naive and ignorant cunning that only succeeds in fooling itself with a pretence at superior intelligence which is, in the last analysis, all that cynicism boils down to. At the same time we glimpse at a superior intelligence and razor sharp acumen which intuitively makes an accurate and holistic analyses and lays bare the essence of the situation, refusing to be fooled by pretences, however well embroidered they are in the best of bourgeois slogans.

Born out of these vacillating feelings of desperation mingled with a deep respect for the Coolies, is ADATS' intervention strategy for the politicisation and conscientisation of an oppressed and exploited population, in order to develop the Coolies as an effective minority, capable of giving effective interpretation to its intelligence in order to cleanse village society and the body polity.

### 1.7.2. COOLIES AND THE POLICE

In all struggling democracies, where right and wrong is not decided based on any moral yardsticks, but is rather the manipulated derivative of numbers and mandates, the role played by the police is shrouded in confusion. This is the reason why there isn't a consistent opinion that any section of the population has with regard to the police force. The Coolie is no exception to this general societal rule.

Ordinarily the Coolie is in a state of embarrassed dread, avoiding members of the police force and taking pains to keep the occasional and inevitable contacts at a purely neutral and courteous plane. But this cannot always be so. It is during the many *Ryot-Coolie* friction that Coolies are forced to relate with the police at more than just a superficial level. And it is then that attitudes and biases of the police come out to play a decisive role in the lives of the Coolies.

An expedient transformation takes place in the Coolies and aloof cynicism is quickly gulped down to give way to an inane faith and fervent hope in the fairness and liberal utterances of

the State and its apparatus. The fervour and helplessness with which the Coolies approach the police often wins for them a momentary pity and condescension, and obtains for them a temporary victory in their fight for one-upmanship against the Ryots.

That the situation quickly reverts back to the earlier status quo when money or political power intervenes on behalf of the *Ryots* is not seen as any big loss because by then the Coolies would have slipped back into their veneer of cynical detachment.

### 1.7.3. COOLIES, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND BUREAUCRATS

Petty official corruption, unlike many other parts of the country, has not reached that low state of affairs where a disgusted rural population join their ranks across the class lines and parochial interests in order to share a common repulsion and anger. As a result, problems that the *Ryots* face with petty government officials do not, by and large, interest or even move the Coolies. On the other hand, these friction provide the Coolies with room to shrewdly strategise and improve their own personal equations with individual government officials.

At a higher level, there are bureaucrats and there are bureaucrats. The corrupt and time servers among them deserve no comment. The confused but sincere, who have not yet succumbed to political pressure, remain one of the few recourse for the Coolies. It is not rare to see a strong bond often developing between them, built on a mutuality that can unite only those who share the common feeling of having been cheated.

### 1.7.4. COOLIES AND THE NEUTRAL POPULATION

Every society has a section of its population who, in their misguided and ill-informed perception, believe that they do not contribute and are therefore not responsible for the levels of exploitation and oppression around them. In the villages of Bagepalli, these include the petty shopkeepers, school teachers, drivers, conductors, college students, lecturers, doctors, veterinarians, bank clerks, local correspondents for newspapers, unemployed graduates, and the like. It is from their ranks that the petty government servant, the local policeman, and those who take up the liberal professions are bred.

They comprise the rural counterpart of the so-called urban middle class and perpetually don the mantle of the suffering and claim to be caught in the vortex of a high standard which they are supposedly forced to live in, of spiralling costs, and of unmatched income levels. They lament that both, those above them as well as those below them, are better off than they are, in some curious manner that they do not care to explain. They assign to themselves the role of neutral observers and impartial critics. Even though this claim is stuffed with a pretentious, undeserving and self-righteous humbug, the Coolies know that the opinion of these self-appointed judges of morals and values still counts in a war where it is vital to be associated with the just cause.

Using their unique knowledge base and intuitive wisdom, the Coolies arrive at the extremely profound realisation that the real values of the State and the intent of its Leaders is vested in and projected through the attitudes of the so-called middle class in society, and not in the utterances or declarations of the Touts turned politicians, however eloquently made.

This recognition of the role and power of the State's value system, as projected through the bourgeois morality of the neutral population, is what serves to whet and soften the antagonistic reactions of the Coolies as well as the *Ryots* to each other. In this manner, it can be said that it is the neutral population in the villages which makes possible the miracle of day to day survival for the Coolies in a milieu which is so hostile to them.

## 1.8. Coolies and the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha

### 1.8.1. HOW IT ALL BEGAN - A HUMBLING OF OUR BOURGEOIS INTELLECTUALISM WITH COOLIE WISDOM

The greatest strength of ADATS was that when we started working in Bagepalli taluk of Kolar district twelve years back, was that we did not pretend to have clear answers to any of the questions relating to Coolie development. Perhaps because answers did not exist and we intuitively felt that our intellectualism had failed, we were driven to reach out to the people in a complete and comprehensive way, in a search for solutions. We knew that our intellectualism needed to be complemented by the wisdom of the poor themselves. Our strength in those days was a conviction, softened with humility, to search.

We realised that this could be achieved only through involvement and in struggle. For the Coolies this was to be a struggle for land, wage, dignity and respect. For us it was a struggle between our intellectual consciousness and the people's social consciousness.

We went to the people without packages and this met their deep socio-cultural aspiration for an identity since they were not treated as victims of our charity. This was the basis for a very strong relationship of mutual respect that soon turned to trust and has weathered many storms since.

### 1.8.2. STRUGGLES AGAINST EXTERNAL OPPRESSORS SHIFTING TO AN INTERNAL RECTIFICATION

In the early years of Coolie Sangha formation, their struggles were always directed against external oppressors and exploiters, the Ryots. Had not our contribution been there, Bagepalli would have witnessed just another temporary rebellion or uprising that the history of any peasantry is abundantly chequered with. It certainly was our intellectualism that contributed to an inward reflection and led to a process of internal rectification in the Coolies' own culture of tolerated indiscipline and opportunism. Their intuition and wisdom was mature enough to realise that without this internal rectification they did not possess the strength to continue the struggle against external oppressors and exploiters, and thus was established a place and role for ourselves in what has turned out to be a unique partnership.

### 1.8.3. DISCIPLINE AND ORGANISATION

The taluk level apex body that the Coolies built up - the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA - has to be understood not just as the culmination of a series of land, wage and other struggles, but in the background of this intellectual struggle that preceded its formation. A struggle between our intelligentsia pitted against the native wisdom and cunning of the Coolies, in an atmosphere of deep and mutual trust; as the outcome of a partnership effort between a consciously humbled intelligentsia and a people who had hitherto only been credited with ignorance, fatalism, and a lack of the faculty to think at all.

The final step to form the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA was accompanied by a slackening in the tackling of issues against external exploitation. Land and wage issues took a temporary back seat and the safeguarding of their organisation against extinction became the Coolies' top most priority. A marked swing in favour of internal rectification marked the commencement of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA. To make their fellow Coolie members stick to decisions they themselves had taken after lengthy deliberation, to make the individual realise that she or he had to sacrifice her or his personal view point in favour of the collective without, at the same time, crushing the minority with bullying by the majority, to develop structures that had built-in recall mechanisms to counter the concept of conventional leadership where the led were reduced to mere props, such were the priorities for Coolies who grappled with organisational issues and problems for many months.

After sufficient organisation was built up, *Ryot* exploitation was faced once again with a new strength based not just on unity, but organisation and discipline. Issues began to be tackled more effectively and with a greater degree of success. To a certain extent, the excitement and thrill that was inherent in adhocism was replaced with almost boring hard work that hardly resembled the earlier struggles that were heavily spiced with hot words and pitched excitement. But yet, the achievements were far greater and of a more lasting value.

#### 1.8.4. THE PROJECTION OF AN ALTERNATE IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

It was perhaps a quest for the lost excitement that led to the next phase in the development of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA as a cohesive body embodying the fundamental political aspiration of the Coolies to be masters over themselves.

To capture power and rule over the *Ryots* was never a political consideration for the Coolies. Theirs was not a desire to counter oppression with oppression, but to offer an alternative to the culture of oppression. To capture a seat that would enable a few of their representatives to sit at a high position was never the ambition of the Coolies. Theirs was a dream to obtain a place of dignity and respect for each and every one of them in their respective villages. We who accompanied the Coolies through that important phase were quick to realise the special and particular character of Coolie political aspirations and articulate it.

The Coolies wished, through the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA, to contribute a new culture to the practice of politics at the grass- root level. They saw the futility in trying to counter existing oppressive political practices with oppressive political practices of another brand. Instead they wished to contribute Coolie knowledge of Coolie suffering in an attempt to humanise and purify the body polity of civic structures.

Following this very peculiar political aspiration, they made a heroic attempt to de-politicise local bodies and make them truly civic representative bodies in early 1987. The fact that they were not able to succeed does not betray any naiveté in their vision but was, rather, an indicator of the nascence and limited coverage of their mass organisation, the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA.

#### 1.8.5. THE Bagepalli Coolie Sangha

The BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA is an organisation created, in this sense, by the Coolies themselves. It is a mass organisation of the Coolies that transgresses the political party while, at the same time, it goes beyond the conventional understanding of a bargaining platform. It is far more than the ganging together of a class of people in order to defend a common economic interest while, at the same time, it performs a trade union role. It does not owe its existence to an urban conceptualisation by intellectuals while, at the same time, it would hardly have come into being without our vital input. It does not take restrictions and limitations posed by village norms and values into consideration while, at the same time, it carves for itself a permanent niche not just in the villages with established CSUs, but also in the imagination of the neighbouring village Coolies, emboldening them with realisable dreams they dare to dream.

Today, the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA very definitely exists in about 150 villages of Bagepalli taluk. Its village level forum, the Coolie Sangha Unit (CSU) allows very personal and individual aspirations and opinions of individual Coolies to be met and respected, while the weekly Cluster Meets and monthly BCS Meetings permit larger cohesiveness of the Coolie class to be projected.

Regular and formal membership lists, suspension and cancellation procedures, minuted weekly and monthly meetings, periodic review meets, annual elections, and the 1st May Coolie Pandaga have given it a definite shape and form which is continually sensitive to and al-

ways adapting to new facets of the Coolies' existence that are increasingly coming under the purview of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA every day.

The successful tackling of various issues that are relevant to Coolies at the village, cluster and taluk levels have given the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA a clout in the taluk and made it, and the Coolies as a whole, emerge as a serious force to be reckoned with.

By its relentless perseverance and commitment to processes rather than to expediency, following the twin principles of grass-root planning and Coolie participation, it has obtained for itself an identity in the neutral population as a moral and just struggle of the Coolies.

Through its sheer achievements in physical and qualitative terms due to the social control it exerts over Coolie members, it has earned the respect of the bureaucrat and the banker as an authentic and effective model of Coolie development. Since the Coolies find an intuitive recognition in the model as something they themselves have contributed to the making of, they are attracted to form Coolie Sanghas by themselves.

And finally, due to the success of the fund raising call given to the Coolies to contribute ten percent of their earnings to their respective CSUs in order to safeguard the posterity of their organisation, there is a guarantee of its relevance and continuity long after the total withdrawal of the promotional organisation, ADATS.

#### 1.8.6. GEOPOLITICAL COVERAGE AND EXPANSION INTO GULUR HOBLI

The BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA stirred deep socio-cultural and political aspirations in other Coolies from surrounding villages. We could not afford to be blind to these aspirations since it was this very participation that enriched and furthered the expanding ideology of the model, corrected lapses and mistakes, and thereby continued to shape the mass organisation on increasingly relevant and effective lines.

In September 1986 ADATS moved into Gulur Hobli on the advice of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA in order to assist the Coolies of Gulur to build up their village level Coolie Sangha Units. EZE, a Northern NGO based in Bonn, West Germany, began to support the Gulur Expansion Programme from January 1987.

## 2. A REPORT ON THE EZE PROJECT NO: 86061 (1987 to 1989)

The Gulur Expansion Programme (GEP), where ADATS started building Coolie Sangha Units (CSUs) in September 1986 in partnership with EZE, is now three and a half years old. Politically strong CSUs have been built in fifty four villages comprising ten Clusters. Along with the other Coolie Sangha members in Bagepalli taluk, they form a formidable and recognised force comprising over 40 percent of the population and 37 percent of the electorate.

When we first entered Gulur Hobli, we got the feeling that the same Coolies who had been attracted to form CSUs in their villages and pressurised us to take up their Hobli seemed to have a lot of wrong perceptions about ADATS. It appeared as if they viewed ADATS as merely an opportunity to grab some material benefits. A thoroughly confused ADATS staff was not too sure as to what was happening. The ALP classes were not being conducted properly, and our staff generally got the feeling that they were being taken for a big ride. We remember those early days to be some very frustrating ones.

It took some time and getting caught in the thick of it all with the heat turning on our Community Workers for us to realise what was happening. That the Coolies of Gulur had, all along, been trying to protect us from the wrath of their Ryots. They were just not able to run regular night classes or carry out the other mundane activities involved in our strategy to build Coolie Sanghas when their very right to form themselves into associations was being questioned by the *Ryot* Sangha of the Hobli.

After that initial spell of confusion followed the mayhem. Our Community Workers were intimidated and beaten up, thrown out of the central villages they had chosen to settle down with their families, and faced every form of abuse and harassment. But thanks to Coolie resilience than to any special effort made by us, the GEP area soon settled down to become an exemplary example of how the implementation technology of the Coolie Sangha Model could be translated in a new area.

The GEP area today has about eleven thousand Coolie women, men and children from 1,682 families organised into 54 well established village level Coolie Sangha Units (CSUs). They have clubbed these into 10 Clusters of about five villages each. 17 percent of these 1,682 families are headed by women and their CSU memberships consequently stand in the names of Coolie women. They also represent an array of castes and communities, including the highest in the hierarchical ladder, through almost one-half of them are Harijans and Tribals.

## 2.1. Community Organisation

These 54 CSUs have a membership strength of 1,682 Coolie families which represents 35.7% of the total population. These Member Coolie families who have formed themselves into Sanghas, however, constitute only 45% of their class due to the village level play of divisive forces fostered by the *Ryot* factions. Each village has an ADATS paid full time Village Level Worker and a woman Village Health Worker to build the Coolie Sanghas and to implement the various programmes, projects and activities of ADATS.

Though ADATS tried to implement an Adult Literacy Programme in the first years of our involvement, this was not taken very seriously by the Coolies. One reason has been, quite honestly, because adult Coolies never consider literacy as a very important prerequisite for developing organisational strength. The conducting of ALP classes always has had, in our experience, an element of our insistence and imposition in it. But the other reason has to do with the hostile area specificity of the Hobli. The Coolies' priorities and concerns during those initial months, when ADATS would normally have concentrated on the seemingly neutral activity of conducting night classes, were totally different.

In any case, the well designed cadre training syllabus which was incorporated into the content and syllabus of the ALP was not fully used to raise the consciousness of the Coolies in any structured or disciplined manner. Bitter struggle has instead, without any exaggeration, been the greatest teacher for the Coolies of Gulur Hobli.

Animated discussions during the innumerable struggles that they have gone through these past three and a half years in order to simply assert their right to form the Coolie Sangha Units has resulted in a deep and fundamental politicisation of a spontaneous and indigenous nature. This has its limitations as well as well as a terrific potential.

Social and economic issues relating to land, wage and caste discrimination, and issues of corruption and cheating were taken up in many villages of the GEP area. But they never got a high priority, even in the minds of the effected persons. This was due to the all prevailing presence of the other more fundamental organisational issue that forever loomed large in front of the Gulur Coolies throughout these past three and a half years.

These personal issues, though tackled with a real seriousness, at great cost in terms of suffering and hardship, and with a surprisingly high degree of actual success were, in this sense, heavily politicised in a base and mundane manner by the Coolies themselves.

The Coolies of the GEP area have their regular and weekly CSU Meetings, Cluster Meets, Situation Meetings and monthly BCS Meetings. Each and every one of these meetings - conducted with a compulsory quorum of two-third the strength - has its Minutes recorded and the

previous Meetings' decisions/ outcomes reviewed. Admissions, suspensions and cancellations into the respective CSUs are decided at the village level itself.

The rules governing these are definite, formal and recorded. Regular annual elections are held for the posts of three village level CSU Representatives (one of them compulsorily a woman), Cluster Secretaries (who will take over once the ADATS paid Community Workers are withdrawn) and the taluk level BCS Secretary.

But the credit for this structured discipline should, in all fairness, go to the staff working in the GEP area. Due to their preoccupation with violent issues and also because of the thrill that is inherent in these struggles, as compared to the drudgery of mundane activity, the Coolies of Gulur have not yet internalised the need for systems and procedures.

## 2.2. Staff in the GEP Area

The village staff in the Gulur Expansion Programme has stabilised at eight Community Workers, 54 Village Level Workers, and as many women Village Health Workers (the appointment of these last in order to gain the confidence of and work with Coolie women was not envisaged when planning the programme). A Field Assistant and two Field Workers help co-ordinate all the Coolie Sangha building activities in the Hobli.

Most of these Community Workers are Coolie youth from the older villages with Coolie Sangha Units, selected by their CSUs to go out to Gulur and help spread the mass organisation. They have worked for many years in their own villages to build Coolie Sanghas, first as Teachers and then as Village Level Workers. They have now gone to live for a short spell of time in the GEP area more in order to translate their ambition to contribute in the spreading of the movement than for a job. Their salaries are just enough to maintain themselves and their families in these new villages and to meet the very many hidden costs that have to be incurred in order to build Coolie Sanghas. Their association with ADATS is more than ten years old and are clear on the need to withdraw after a few years and go back to their native villages where they will continue as Member Coolies.

The Gulur Village Level Workers are local Coolie youth selected by their respective Sanghas to conduct the night classes, record the minutes of meetings, and to assist the Member Coolie families in every manner necessary in order to build up the CSUs. These youth come forward to work as VLWs in order to satisfy their fundamental need for recognition, an identity and leadership. During their tenure in ADATS, they are gradually weaned away from the conventional definition of power and leadership to become CSU functionaries in the true sense of the word.

## 2.3. Meetings, Training & Support

Many training programmes have been conducted for the 147 CSU Representatives (one-third women) as well as the Village Staff. These include the setting of permanent fora like the weekly Situation Meetings every Friday, special sessions to impart knowledge on social laws in favour of women, regarding the Mandal Panchayat system, about Land Grant Rules and the newly introduced Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, etc. Participatory training through discussions has become an ongoing and integral part of not just the programme but also of Coolie culture in these villages.

Legal Aid and Aid Distress have contributed to making wage strikes, land struggles and issues against untouchability a success in the programme villages. Throughout this first three-year phase of Coolie Sangha Formation, these two have remained a discretionary assistance given to the Coolies, albeit on the positive recommendation of the CSUs and Clusters. In the next three-year phase of Coolie Sangha Formalisation, we intend to decentralise both

these as well as the Medical Aid budgets so that the Coolies can themselves expend the amounts in their respective Clusters.

#### 2.4. Community Assets built up in the GEP Area

10 Community Halls have been built in the GEP area though it has not been possible to evenly distribute them at the originally planned rate of one per Cluster. 60 ladies bicycles have been given out to the villages. Women cycling on errands has become a common sight even in remote villages.

#### 2.5. THE COOLIE CREDIT FUND (CCF) PROJECT

ADATS initiated a Coolie Credit Fund project in 52 villages of the GEP area in order to set up an alternate credit structure in these villages whereby the beneficiary Member Coolie families can avail of interest-free loans for their petty productive and consumption needs. The total grant given out by ADATS to the 54 CSUs to run their Coolie Credit Funds is Rs 1,244,276 which works out to a percapita availability of Rs 740 per Coolie.

It is the explicitly stated objective of this project that technical targets are subservient to the larger political goal of empowerment. Perhaps precisely because of this, the CCF project has an astoundingly high degree of success even when measured with technical and achievement oriented yardsticks alone, with a repayment rate of over 98%.

As on September 1989 a total of 619 Coolie borrowers took loans averaging at Rs 806 to overcome various problems. Rearing cattle was the most popular reason for Coolies availing CCF loans with 55.1% of loans taken for this purpose. Crop loans and working capital for petty trade followed as close second and third. Coolies also borrow for consumption purposes, buying implements, redeeming lost lands, repairing bullock carts and rethatching their huts. Only two Coolies had borrowed for buying feed and fodder to maintain cattle that they already owned. This utilisation pattern indicates that the Coolies of Gulur are keen to use any and every opportunity offered to them in order to set up alternate sources of earning and escape from the clutches of the Ryots.

Decisions as to who should avail an interest-free loan are taken by the entire village level CSUs together approving. Decisions as to when they can repay are made by the individual borrowers themselves after publicly explaining their personal liquidity positions. The project has, in this manner, fostered a feeling of community. Private and personal barriers that individual Coolies hitherto built around themselves - specially with regard to their domestic financial matters - completely breaking down and giving way to a spirit of mutual co-operation and support.

Detailed descriptions of this project can be found in the many conceptual papers and reports that ADATS and others have brought out on the Coolie Credit Funds.

#### 2.6. Cost Effectiveness studies carried out by the Coolies themselves

ADATS has a larger objective of developing the implementation technology for the building of Coolie Sanghas in a geopolitically viable area that encompasses Bagepalli taluk. The Coolies of the GEP area were therefore encouraged, throughout this first three-year formation phase to keep the cost effectivity of the model in mind.

In each of the 54 CSUs, one set of Minutes Books kept track of the benefits they received from ADATS - be it in the form of salaries, assistance during struggles sickness, or calamities, grants to build up their CCFs, wages to implement a DLDP project, or whatever. At the same time, another set of Minutes Books were maintained to keep track of benefits they

themselves could mobilise from the government, banks and other sources as a direct and perceptible result of ADATS' community organisation work.

The result of summing up these figures for the entire GEP area (in an exercise carried out by the Coolies themselves in a series of Review Meets) showed them that for every Rupee expended, they had derived an additional benefit of three more.

### 3. A REPORT ON THE EZE SUPPORTED DRY LAND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

A massive three year Dry Land Development Project (DLDP) has been introduced in the GEP area from March 1988 to give meaningful employment to one person from each Member Coolie family for five summer months every year. This programme aims to develop about 3,700 acres of virgin and under utilised, highly eroded dry land hugging the hills and belonging to the Member Coolies. The Coolie Sangha Units are being strengthened by this DLDP because the project is subservient to clearly spelt out non-economic objectives which are built into it. It has put a stop to seasonal migration and has given a chance for regular and day to day Coolie Sangha building activities to continue without interruption. The unjust and low wage structure in the GEP area has been positively effected with the average daily wage rising from Rs 3 to Rs 11.

But here again it can be seen that while impressive technical achievements have been made by the Coolies of Gulur, these have been obtained more as responses to bitter challenges from the *Ryots* rather than as sustained actions carried out in peacetime to attain a consolidation of newly obtained gains in societal position and strength.

#### 3.1. The Project

The payment of wages is the largest budget component of the DLDP being implemented in the GEP area since the past two years. This project has not yet been completed and will continue till August 1990. We have, in these two years, already spent an amount of Rs 2,432,912 in the payment of DLDP wages at a rate of Rs 10 per day for each of 1,454 Coolies who worked on their own lands for five months a year these last two years. Membership in the GEP area has, in the meantime, risen to 1,682 Coolie families who will benefit the DLDP in 1990.

A crowbar, spade and iron basket have been given to each and every one of these 1,454 Member Coolie family families so that they can implement this three year project for the development of their dry lands. Additionally, each batch of 15 to 20 Coolies in the CSUs of the GEP area has been supplied with common tools like heavy hammers, etc. which they can collectively use for not just implementing their DLDP works, but also in order to take up other *Ryot* or government works as labour contractors after the completion of DLDP works every year.

#### 3.2. An Overview of Achievements made in the DLDP

In an overview, we can claim that the 1,454 Coolie families have together worked on 3,713 acres of land belonging to 90.7 percent of them; that they have bunded 2,731 acres of land with 126,500 meters of rock and mud bunds; that they have strengthened 11,840 meters of already existing bunds; that they have cleared rocks and boulders from 981 acres of land; that they have checked 8,375 meters of ravines and gullies; and that they have brought 751 acres of brand new land under cultivation for the very first time and given these to their landless fellow Coolie members who constitute almost 10 percent of their ranks.

We can also claim that they have done all this expending an average of 53.5 persondays of their labour on each acre of land, using 1,454 sets of implements supplied to them. And fi-

nally that at the time of writing this report, in 1990, the Coolie membership in the GEP area has risen to 1,682 families.

But such a reduction would be a gross understatement since the story behind these achievements, as also the results themselves, go much deeper. Even before the initial date of starting the project, all the Coolie Sangha members from each village together inventoried the work that needed to be done on their fields. They divided the available persondays (CSU strength x 125 days) among their total land holdings according to the intensity of labour intervention that each plot would need. These allocations, called the DLDP Plans, were ratified by their respective Cluster Meets and the weekly Situation Meeting before being finally approved by the monthly BCS Meeting.

### 3.3. Fostering Pluralism and the development of a Work Ethos

From March 1988 onwards, for five months each year, the Member Coolie families have been working on their holdings in batches of 15 to 25 Coolies, in a very systematic manner. Though each batch is led by a CSU Representative, it is the land owner's writ that rules when a batch works on her or his land. They build bunds, clear shrubs, pebbles and boulders, check ravines and gullies, dig farm ponds, or whatever she or he thinks need be done of the holding. On the evening of the last day of each individual's work, a special CSU Meeting is held and its minutes recorded in the DLDP Minutes Book. Here, it is not only the actual work done and its details that are recorded, but also various other matters pertaining to what actually happened during those three or four days of collective labour. Decisions are taken to pay the wages for sick Coolies even though they are not present, stricture a Coolie who acted with a caste bias or with disinterest, someone who tried to send her or his small children to work on behalf of the family, etc.

In this manner a very healthy pattern of work ethics, peculiar and particular to each and every one of the 52 villages emerged, taking the caste composition and other special features of their specific situation into consideration.

Some broad and overall decisions were also taken by the Coolies for the GEP area as a whole. These included the setting aside of Re 1 each from their DLDP wages as a compulsory saving towards their Sangha Funds and the linking of Adult literacy Programme objectives to the payment of DLDP wages, the ensuring of equal wages (not just in the DLDP but also in *Ryot* works) for both, women and men.

### 3.4. Societal gains obtained through the payment of DLDP Wages

In less than 2 years of its implementation, the manner of and process behind the payment of DLDP Wages in the GEP area has had some lasting achievements. These include a dramatic rise in daily wages from Rs 2.50 to an average of Rs 13, the consolidation of scattered and fragmented Coolie holdings into single and contiguous plots (through realisations made and decisions arrived at in the thousands of special CSU DLDP Meetings held every year), a dramatic increase in agricultural production by the poor themselves (even if these magic quantitative leaps get stabilised after a few years and refuse to grow at the same rate as wet land production, such jumps in production did give the Coolies a great leverage to readjust their disadvantaged positions in village society vis-à-vis the Ryots), etc.

But the most important achievement - because it is lasting and sustainable even after this three year special intervention is completed - was that it gave an overall spur to the agricultural economy. All the human equations - timely availability of labour, daily wage rate, the woman:man equation, etc. - were so drastically altered in such a large and contiguous area (the same DLDP is simultaneously being implemented, with NOVIB support, in 87 villages adjoining the GEP area) that the Ryots, whose production accounts for over 80% of the farm

produce in the taluk, are in turn forced to increase their yields through the use of better seeds, fertilisers, etc. as opposed to solely depending on increased squeezing of surplus from out of a hitherto poor and hapless lot of Coolies.

The payment of DLDP wages triggered social tensions in the villages because it interfered with the basic socio-economic fabrics on which *Ryot* exploitation is based. This lent to an escalation of tensions and periodically erupted in senseless orgies of violence and mayhem when the *Ryots* unleashed their anger against the Coolies. It was not necessarily the middle or rich classes who provoked these. Often enough it was rowdy elements from the lower middle classes, who had been refused CSU membership, who led these acts of violence. But their acts found a sublime support from the middle peasantry.

The peasantry, whether in India or elsewhere, is notorious by being unpredictable in turning out to be either very progressive or ultra reactionary. ADATS found itself to have a special role in being continually sensitive to this reaction and steering events on safe paths without at the same time compromising on any of the deeper and lasting societal gains that Coolies could make through the taking of calculated risks. As today's events in Bagepalli reveal, this is no mean or enviable task.

### 3.5. The role of DLDP Staff

An Extension Worker, an Agriculturist and two Field Workers have been appointed to assist the Coolies and their CSUs in implementing this project. They have done an excellent job in giving useful support to the Coolies in terms of making timely payments after pursuing their DLDP Minutes Books and DLDP attendance registers, keeping pilferage and leakage at an absolute zero in spite of the very large amounts involved. We are proud that in addition to our policy of total transparency, the basic honesty and sincerity of purpose in the DLDP staff has contributed to this remarkable achievement.

But in a purely technical sense, our Agriculturist has not been able to offer any totally new or innovative advice. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that the Coolie lands were so backward and underdeveloped that what had to be done on them in terms of boulder, rock, pebble and shrub clearance, levelling, bunding, ravine and gully check, etc. was quite apparent and obvious. The second is that the Coolies have, in a very timid and primitive manner, tried to eke a cultivation out of these lands for so long that they had, by now, very strong dreams as to what had to be done on them if and when an opportunity presented itself. These dreams and aspirations of the Coolies were too strong to be countered with any contradicting advice. We believe that the Agriculturist will have a greater role in the second three year follow up phase of the programme when he can impart special skills on drought prone farming.

But on the whole, ADATS has a great admiration for the remarkable wisdom that the Coolies possess even in technical matters like the development of dry lands. We recognise that this wisdom is the cumulative total of all their hitherto unrecognised dreams and visions.

## 4. FUTURE PLANS FOR GULUR HOBLI

### 4.1. Integration into the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha

In January 1990 all the Member Coolie families and Representatives from the 54 village level CSUs in the Gulur area will be formally introduced as full fledged and accredited members of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA with full voting rights.

This will enable them, for example, to put up their own candidate from Gulur Hobli for the post of BCS Secretary. They can also obtain a greater degree of autonomy and independence from ADATS staff rid themselves of the continuous nag and adhocism that is inevitable when

trapped in the mercy of social workers, however well meaning and politically clear they may be! They will have greater independence in matters pertaining to the operation of their CSU bank accounts, the possibility to overrule ADATS' advice on the usage of their Coolie Credit Funds provided the monthly BCS Meeting approves, etc.

But most importantly, integration into the BCS will give the 1,682 Coolie families from Gulur a greater sense of identification with the remaining four thousand Member Coolie family families in and around Bagepalli taluk and help get rid of that feeling of isolation which so easily permits them to slip back into an apathetic cynicism.

We are convinced that the ensuing contact between the Coolies of Gulur and the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA will be a two-way affair which will not just benefit the new comers. Besides bringing them under the structured discipline of the taluk level apex organisation it will, at the same time, enable the newly joined Coolies to contribute to the making and furthering of the representation and discipline of the BCS by adding the peculiar and particular flavour of their area specificity to the mass organisation. It has been our experience that each time a new group of villages joined the BCS, it somehow grew into a body that took onto its agenda increased areas, greater responsibilities and additional facets of the Coolies' lives.

#### 4.2. Development of Autonomy and a Positive Pluralism

We are acutely aware of the tendency for huge structures which are so awesomely disciplined and efficient like the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA, even if they be authentic and independent people's organisations, to slip away from the rationale of a centralised democracy and slither into the negative logic of centralism per se, demanding that their Members conform to a standard uniformity.

The sheer success of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA demands the encouraging of a greater autonomy to its village level Units and the fostering of a positive pluralism. This has to be correctly understood as the inevitable and therefore healthy development due to, rather than in spite of, the achievements made by the mass organisation as a viable and effective apex coordinating body.

On the one hand, the BCS can easily fall prey to the evil design of anyone who is shrewd enough to hijack the sheer numbers and the subtle but all prevailing influence that it has over so many people, their individual as well as collective thinking, and over their concerted actions. On the other hand, even with the best of intentions, it is possible that considerations like manageability introduce a centralism that the members find very difficult to escape out of.

In either case, the concept of leadership will get reinforced. It was in order to reject this concept of leadership and all that it stood for that the Coolies built the BCS in the first place. And the success they have had in building it up so well is once again to be found in this very rejection. Not guarding the mass organisation from a possible reintroduction of the powerful logic of leadership through the slipping into a centralised structure will result in individual Coolies getting reduced to a faceless mass, a mere abstraction in a common denominator.

It therefore becomes imperative to ensure that a process is set in where there is an uninhibited participation of each and every family member, specially the women. Autonomy will be meaningless without this kind of a wholesome participation where each and every one contributes. Only then will a positive pluralism and healthy diversity develop in each and every village level CSU.

The oft repeated argument warning against autonomy is that it will be hijacked by self styled local leaders and converted into a license for liberalism. There is some measure of truth in this apprehension. But if certain trends or developments in some or the other autonomous

Unit has to be prevented from slipping into a license for liberalism, this can be done through a responsible political intervention of argument, debate and convincing, rather than through any central dictum or threat.

Here is an illustration of one of the deeper and higher roles that can be played by us, the bourgeois intelligentsia who have chosen to accompany the Coolies. ADATS recognises that any other form of restricted or representative participation through leaders who claim to speak on behalf of their constituencies, will only lead to harmful consequences. We therefore accept the role of seeing the decentralisation policy through in a very serious and responsible manner in this three year Formalisation phase.

### 4.3. Budget Decentralisation

In our entire area of operation, in Bagepalli taluk and elsewhere, ADATS has decided to forgo the prerogative to make discretionary sanctions in the fields of referral health, legal aid and aid distress. In the GEP area, it was we who held and managed these budgets in the first three year Coolie Sangha Formation phase. These budgets and decision making powers will now be decentralised to the ten Cluster Meets where the Coolies will themselves decide upon and expend on these items.

The normative and emotional reason for this decision is, simply stated, because these are the only areas of our relationship with the Coolies where we are forced to exhibit a kind of a God like superiority and assume onto ourselves the powers to decide who should live and who should not.

We have never felt very comfortable about this and it has caused some very personally embarrassing moments when, for example, we had to decide whether a Coolie needing surgery had to be attended to at great cost or if the same money should be used to continue with our community health education activities in that Cluster for some more months. We looked at this role as a responsibility thrust upon us, and justified our acceptance with the lame excuse that the Coolies' unity and organisation was not yet mature enough to handle discretionary budgets with limited moneys.

A few months back, ADATS took a hard look at itself and decided to put an abrupt stop to these pretences at a false superiority which we had assumed onto ourselves. We decided that the maximum "risk" we would run is that of the Coolies making a few wrong prioritisation and foolish decisions or, at the very most, some amount of misappropriation by their elected representatives or functionaries. These, we felt, were hazards that everyone could quite easily live with.

The handing over of responsibilities, we realised, was the only effective way to introduce and enhance management capabilities in the Coolies and their Sanghas. We will illustrate this through the example of referral health and medical aid:

Ever since ADATS incorporated in its budget a discretionary allocation for extending medical aid to the Coolies, sicknesses have never been a threat for them. Earlier, the very thought of falling ill and having to go to the local *Ryots* for an urgently required hand loan was enough to deter the Coolies from even joining their village level CSUs, let alone taking up issues that they felt were vital.

For the past ten years, we can state with absolute certainty that this fear has been totally wiped out from the Coolies' minds due to the very efficient arrangements we have made for filling out prescriptions for medicines not available with the government hospitals, referring sick people to major church and government hospitals and meeting their travel costs, the training of VHWs and supplying them with basic medicines every month, etc.

Our not continuing to provide succour with this discretionary activity would result in a major setback for the Coolies by eroding their possibilities to build up the Coolie Sanghas. But the presumption here is that the Coolies would not be able to do the same for themselves even if they had the financial resources and wherewithal. It is this presumption that the budget decentralisation decision wishes to challenge.

Budget decentralisation should not be interpreted as a damning of the poor to services that are less than wholesome or efficient. The ultimate measure of effectivity should be that the same feeling of security and fearlessness that the ADATS run health services instilled in the Coolies should continue even after they themselves take up the running of these activities. We strongly suspect that after an initial spell of floundering, the Coolies will be able to provide this security to themselves far better than we did, provided we take a positive attitude and support their attempt with encouragement and technical assistance.

Autonomy means the giving of local independence to the constituent Units of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA. In our example of health, it is possible that some Clusters decide to refer patients only to government hospitals, others to government and church, some Clusters pay only for the patients' expenses while others support the patient and an attendant, some pay travel costs for the sick to go to Bagepalli, others do not, etc. In these variations and through the sharing of their different prioritisation and procedures in the monthly two day BCS Meetings, it is possible that the Coolies together evolve a health coverage system that is quite different from the one that ADATS now claims is honed to maximum efficiency and low cost. In this way, autonomy will lead on to positive pluralism and better results.

And finally, budget decentralisation will promote a better inter CSU relationship by making the Cluster Meets the forum to take these decisions and expend the moneys. In the initial stages there is bound to be a lot of dissatisfaction and friction among the constituent CSUs of a Cluster. It is precisely these friction, misunderstandings and mutual accusations which will lead to a healthy relationship based on mutuality because no CSU would, in the end, wish to walk out of the forum where the money is without leaving some doors open to come back.

#### 4.4. Mahila Meetings

ADATS took a conscious decision, at a time which coincided with the start of the Gulur Expansion Programme, that though the concerns of women were not just a "separate problem" that needed "special attention", it was necessary to focus attention on the fact that the general clubbing of women into the movement could easily degenerate into a liberal paying of lip sympathy, superficially claiming that the Coolie Sangha was gender-bias free. The position and problems of Coolie women, we believe, needs to be repeatedly and emphatically re-focused over and over again, till the gender-bias free characteristic of the Coolie Sangha naturally and openly projects itself in each and every field of even the Coolies' personal and private lives.

Though the Adult Literacy classes have been conducted, for example, for both women and men, we believe that it is necessary to re-conduct them once again for women alone. Though we can theoretically claim that women and men have equal right to represent their families as Coolie Members, it is necessary to ourselves identify Coolie families where women take more than an average burden of management and specially invite them to be members in the place of their husbands. Similarly, we believe that the reservation made for women of one seat from each village level Coolie Sangha in the election for CSU Representatives has to continue till more than one woman per CSU start getting elected.

DLDP wages will continue to be paid to Coolie women instead of to men. The Giriraja chicken programme will have only women beneficiaries. Only ladies bicycles will be bought by ADATS. Women will be appointed at senior positions even if this creates more "practical

problems” and “compromises on efficiency”. And in our writings, ADATS will continue to use she to also mean he.

#### 4.5. Gap Filling

In the first three and half years of our involvement, quite a few villages were left untouched by Coolie Sangha building operations. As a result, a lot of gaps are left in our coverage. This has had serious negative consequences during wage strikes, etc. There easily are ten or more such villages with a substantial Coolie population to be taken up in the coming three year phase.

It will be the collective responsibility of the respective Cluster Meets (a total of 31 local Coolies, for example, comprising the Cluster Secretary, eighteen CSU Representatives, six VLWs and six VHVs) to go into these villages and convince the Coolies there to form Coolie Sanghas. ADATS’ responses will be confined to paying the salaries of the new village level staff who will be selected by and answerable to the Cluster Meets, providing facilities, and the including of these newly joined Coolie Members in our list of beneficiaries.

Coolies will get a chance to reaffirm their faith in the Coolie Sangha through the advocacy of the model as something positive and desirable to their neighbours. This will prove to be very necessary to fight a complacency which is bound to set in once external forces of repression and subjugation have been tamed.

We foresee that this will once again contribute to a positive pluralism in the Coolie Sangha Formalisation phase since there will be an uneven level of organisational maturity and development in the GEP area. This, we believe, is not only inevitable but also healthy.

#### 4.6. Effective Coverage of village populations & Entry into Local Bodies

This concept has been elaborately explained in ADATS’ draft paper entitled “Furthering the Coolie Sangha Model of development”. It presupposes that through the rural poor are demographically an absolute majority in the village populations, our experience in even the older villages with strong Coolie Sanghas shows that not more than 40 percent of the Coolies organise themselves into a mass organisation with serious consequence and clout. Therefore the mere extending of the model to neighbouring villages and taluks will not result in the Coolies becoming a majority that wields determining power.

Yet, by their sheer numbers, a disciplined group of organised people can positively influence the prevailing practice as well as course of societal development. To arrive at a quantum definition of a geopolitically viable area coverage, it is necessary to keep on extending till this definition is obtained. In other words, the Coolies will become an effective minority in village society the moment they are capable of and thereby actually do reshape the normative base of village society through a projection of their own values which are peculiar and particular to their class characteristic. These Coolie values, we believe, are based on a recognition of the need to preserve justice and morality, even when the rest of society interprets such a pursuit as unrealistic and naive.

It is not ADATS alone, even if with our northern partners, who have a role in this effecting of a geopolitical coverage. We believe that the organised Coolies, without leaving their respective villages, can all put one foot forward. This will result in a great stride that will take us towards a larger area coverage. Coolies in the GEP area can do this by giving effective expression to what the Coolie Sangha really means. That it is not just a self-centred strategy for Coolie development alone, but an empowering of the Coolie class in order to redefine concepts of power, leadership, attitudes towards women, minorities, contemporary political practices, etc.

To do this, and also in so doing, they will strike alliances with other suffering and exploited sections in the villages, including *Ryot* women. Their strategy will involve the identification of more general issues demanding a larger struggle, the entering and influencing of local level civic bodies including the Mandal Panchayats, the Primary Land Development Bank, co-operative societies, etc.

#### 4.7. Sangha Funds and the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha's Posterity

The rather lofty call given by ADATS asking the Coolies to contribute ten percent of their earnings, from whatever source, to the respective units of their Coolie Sangha was, besides being a very serious solution offered for their organisational posterity, also symbolic in nature. It was based on the principle of the indivisibility between the concepts of participation, self-confidence and sustainability on the one side, with self-financing on the other.

We had also ensured that Coolie contributions made to a particular Unit or Cluster would not, under any circumstances, be transferred or used by any other Unit or Cluster or even by the central BCS. This was done with a view to contribute to the development of genuine autonomy in the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA.

At a more tangible level, we had placed a target of Rs 10,000,000 before the Coolies. This was the magic figure which would, beyond all doubt, guarantee the continuity of the Coolies' struggle. Half of this, we went on to say, ADATS would transfer in the form of fixed assets like Community Halls and other buildings in the villages. Another Rs 2,000,000 has been built up in the form of an organic farm which will begin to yield profits in another five or six years. And the balance of Rs 3,000,000 had to be generated by the Coolies themselves through cash collections from out of their daily wage earnings.

As on 31st December 1989, the taluk's Coolies have collected a total of Rs 1,045,805 which is just over one-third the projected target:

Rs 449,803	from the older 27 villages where we have worked for the past twelve years, but the call to contribute to their Sangha Funds is only four years old,
Rs 394,712	from the 53 villages of the CEP area where we have worked for the past four and a half years, and the call is four years old, and
Rs 201,290P	from the 54 villages of the GEP area where we have worked for the past three and a half years, and the call is three years old.

But the situation today in Gulur is that Member Coolies, by and large, contribute only a tenth of the income which they receive from ADATS as direct benefits. There is a general reluctance to similarly contribute from their other sources of private income. Every year, after the harvest, they make a voluntary contribution that has no proportionate bearing to their yields. And from the higher daily wages that they earn from the peasants as a result of ADATS inspired Coolie struggle there is hardly any Sangha Fund contributions being generated.

This situation has to be radically changed these coming three years through education and persuasion. Sangha Fund contributions that we presently compute at representing only a little over 3 percent of the total Coolie earnings have to rise towards the target of 10 percent. Besides instilling in them the habit to contribute properly to their Sangha Funds, ADATS will also instil in them the practice of discussing and deciding on the investment of these moneys in socially responsible endowments.

#### 4.8. Managing their Coolie Credit Funds (CCFs)

This project, not to be confused with the earlier described Sangha Funds, is a fund built up with grants from ADATS in order to provide the Coolies with interest-free credit for their petty productive and consumption purposes. Enclosed please find annexures that give details on the build up and performance of this Coolie Credit Fund (CCF) project in the GEP area.

We believe that these CCFs, which have been structurally built up with a very high degree of participation and sufficient checks and controls, are sound enough to enable the Coolies to handle an even larger volume of capital. The Coolies of Gulur will need far more resources if they are to ensure that there is an economic development on par with and compatible to the great strides they are making in socio-political terms.

We therefore envisage, in this three year phase, to increase the CCF targets by another Rs 1,000 per Member Coolie. But in order to achieve a real and tangible increase in their income levels and standard of living, it is necessary to give increased technical support to use their CCFs more productively. ADATS will therefore, in this three year phase, source relevant expertise in various fields connected to Coolie production and link their knowledge and valuable advice to the CCFs.

ADATS will also further upgrade its accompaniment techniques with state of the art management skills, including the special software development for an OnLine computerisation of the CCFs. Our fairly extensive experience with the OnLine, multi-user and multiple tasking computerisation of various other aspects of Coolie Sangha building operations has shown us that semi-literate Coolies are quite capable of handling a sophisticated Management Information System in order to obtain objective information, apply their own subjectivity to these demographic and other statistics, and come up with very mature political decisions and make good policies, provided the philosophy behind the computerisation programme rests on healthy practices like total and exceptionless transparency in each and every sphere of the Voluntary Agency's operations, and a conscious design and decision to prevent exclusivity.

#### 4.9. Staff Withdrawal

ADATS has decided to extend the terms of the ten Community Workers in the Gulur Expansion Programme area by another two years in order to complete some of the political processes which could not be accomplished in the first phase of Coolie Sangha Formation. By December 1991, however, all these Coolie youth from the other parts of the taluk, who have earlier worked as Teachers and VLWs in their native villages when Coolie Sanghas were being built up, will be withdrawn from the GEP area.

But elections for the post of Cluster Secretaries will immediately be held in all these villages and the role of the Community Workers will be limited to accompaniment and political motivation alone. More than ensuring that formalities and procedures are adhered to, for example, the Community Workers will concentrate on explaining to the Coolies why such an organisational discipline is so vital. This role has been explained in great detail in the enclosed paper on Coolie Sangha Formalisation.

By the end of this three year phase of Coolie Sangha Formalisation in the GEP area, all the sixty Village Level Workers will also be withdrawn. At that time, the elected CSU Representatives and Cluster Secretaries will themselves handle the final three year phase of Coolie Sangha Consolidation.