

0121. 2nd Progress Report on Coolie Sangha Consolidation (Feb 1994)

This Report covers a 16 month period and has a detailed commentary on the Coolie Sangha's participation in the '93 Gram Panchayat elections.

It then reports on preparations for ADATS' withdrawal and financing the future, and ends with a reflection on the type of individualism that the Coolie Sangha attempts to project.

The sheer work done during the past 16 months in preparation for our total withdrawal from Bagepalli taluk by March 1995 has been staggering. Every single day has been a hectic one full of village and cluster meetings, special reflections, heated discussions, and poring over literally thousands of possible solutions for problems that Coolies will encounter the moment they take formal and absolute control over their organisation.

This Report has to be read as a continuum of the preceding one dated October 1993 on the DLDP 2nd Phase project. But unlike that one, this Report is not the product of a participatory process with the Coolies. It is a document prepared by ADATS with reflections, analysis and criticism which the BCS would do well to ponder on. In some ways, the new role of ADATS in accompanying the independent BCS is getting initiated with the writing of this 2nd Progress Report on Coolie Sangha Consolidation in Bagepalli taluk.

1. THE NEW BCS SECRETARY

The 1992-93 BCS Secretary, who had set for himself the 3 point agenda of promoting transparency, discussing ways and means to finance the future, and examining ADATS' future role in Bagepalli taluk, completed his term on 30 April 1993 and was happy to once again resume his duties as Field Worker at Chickballapur after a particularly gruelling year.

On 1 May 1993 a Harijana youth was elected as the next BCS Secretary. He is an old hand who had first worked as a VLW at Somnathpura, then as Community Worker in Chakwel during the horrible carnage of 1987, and then as BCS Secretary in 1988-89, immediately after Community Worker withdrawal from the Chelur Area, during the major disturbances at Peddur, Nallagutlapalli and Shivapura¹. Since then he has been working as a Field Worker in Gulur. Though this new Secretary had a very rich experience in organisational and political matters, he decided to place politics in the back seat and set for himself the single agenda of introducing fiscal discipline in member families. The DLDP 2nd Phase Progress Report which we brought out in September 1993 gives a fairly elaborate description of efforts undertaken in this direction.

But the term of the current BCS Secretary has not been quite so simple and unilateral. We have had hordes of almost continuous visits from friends, well-wishers and northern partners to discuss matters related to the future - how the Coolies will handle matters by themselves, whether all the present thrusts and concerns will continue unabated, what role ADATS would have, and the financing of the independent people's organisation. The Current BCS Secretary prudently involved the previous Secretary during these visits and discussions.

We have also had numerous sessions with Dr Nath (FAIR), Anil Chaudhary (formerly of PRIA) and Dr M.K. Bhat (BCO/NOVIB) who gave us 3rd Opinions on the entire question of withdrawal, the future role of ADATS vis-à-vis the independent BCS, and the political implications of withdrawal respectively. ADATS and the Bagepalli CSUs went through a full

¹ All reported in the DLDP Completion Report dated January 1990

blown Evaluation jointly commissioned by all our 3 funding partners in July 1993. And then there was the meeting with our funding partners on 25 November 1993 where it was decided to form a Consortium to finance ADATS' Coolie Sangha building efforts for the next 10 years.

And finally, the BCS Secretary had to steer the entire Coolie Sangha through a keenly contested Gram Panchayat elections in December 1993.

2. COVERAGE

There are now 3,935 normal members in 125 functioning CSUs in the Old, Chelur and Gulur Areas of Bagepalli taluk. Over the last reported figures of 3,545 families in 110 functioning CSUs, this represents an increase of 11% in terms of membership and 13.6% in number of villages. The numbers will climb higher if all those families who have presently been put on hold till they regularly attend CSU Meetings for a stipulated minimum period of 4-6 months are also given membership. But the population coverage figure has stayed unchanged at 27%.

This rise has been in spite of ADATS being in the final year of involvement in the taluk with no further material benefits forthcoming and the unclear fate of the Endowment Fund for the BCS. We can only conclude that Coolies find the idea of belonging to an authentically independent people's organisation run by themselves very attractive.

There is however, a slight change in membership composition. 60% of the current membership is from the scheduled castes and tribes, 25% from middle castes and only 15% from the forward castes². Similarly, there is a change in ethnic coverage, as different from composition. While 34% of SC/ST and 28% of middle caste population are attracted to join the Coolie Sangha, only 14% of upper caste people want to belong to the fast becoming independent people's organisation. Read together, these figures suggest that though elements of the *unification of the poor across narrow and parochial caste lines* agenda will stay on as a lasting effect of ADATS' work even after withdrawal, it is Coolies from the lower and middle castes who are more attracted to belong to such groupings.

The overall figures hide another slightly disturbing factor. 4 CSUs which were properly functioning in October 1992 have in the meantime dropped out. 19 brand new villages have formed CSUs. This takes the total number of villages which are in the 1st 3 year Formation phase to 31. These formation efforts have to be carried out by the Coolies themselves with no village staff (Community Workers or Village Level Workers) presence from ADATS and hardly any material benefits except the odd ALP material that we can scrounge from the Extension taluks. The question which comes to mind (apart from the obvious one of how the BCS will achieve this without NGO support) is why some Coolies who had stayed on for so long in the Coolie Sangha, gone through a rigorous educational process and received substantial material and non-material benefits, chose to leave...

19% of the membership continues in the names of Coolie women and there is no change from the last reported figures.

3. GRAM PANCHAYAT '93 ELECTIONS

The 1st stage³ of the Gram Panchayat (GP '93) elections were held on 27 December 1993. An average of 17 settlements (approx. 2 settlements = 1 village) were clubbed to form a Gram Panchayat and the taluk was delineated into 24 such GPs. But elections were held in only 22 GPs with court litigation resulting in postponements in the other 2.

² 1½ years back, the figures were 55% SC/ST, 18% middle castes and 27% forward castes.

³ The other 2 stages for the Taluk and District (Zilla) levels are slated for April 1994.

After examining their coverage in the newly delineated Gram Panchayats, the Coolie Sangha decided to participate in these local civic body elections by fielding CSU Candidates in 12 GPs.

Though the State Government had given NGOs a mandate to educate the rural masses, help set up citizens committees, select candidates, etc. ADATS decided to stay clear of these GP '93 Elections and let it be an entirely Coolie Sangha managed affair.

3.1. Character of Local Body Elections

Before proceeding any further, it is important to clarify the characteristic of local body elections in rural areas. Unlike in state elections, the distant popularity of personages do not normally effect the outcome of local body elections. Except immediately after crisis of national proportions, neither do larger issues or slogans of political parties. In spite of the obvious material advantage in capturing/controlling civic bodies, rural voters do not perceive these elections as strategies to better run such bodies. Instead, local body elections are referendums on the personal popularity of the candidates themselves, determined by very local factors, whereby the voters give their basic green signals to selected persons to enter into the arena of politics.

For the contesting candidates, performance in local body elections is therefore a vital prerequisite to gain larger political recognition since only then can they, as individual politicians, claim to have their bands of followers when vying with each other for party tickets and much coveted inner-party posts. Village touts work extremely hard to succeed in local body elections, and leaders at a slightly higher level pitch in their everything to ensure the victory of favourite touts.

The very function of local body elections, therefore, can be stated as the conversion of myths and perceptions of strength into real constituency bases for the contesting parties in a parliamentary democracy. To view this political process as merely an unnecessary splitting of the population on party lines, is in some strange way to de-politicise reality and pretend that power blocks just do not exist. It is a denial of parliamentary democracy itself.

However much we may try to romanticise them, local body elections are not, in reality, that ideal mechanism by which a rural community takes participatory control of its immediate concerns. They are instead the very first stepping stones in the political system which we call parliamentary democracy.

As with any frontier field like, for example, the primitive accumulation of capital by either an individual, company, or even society at large, they are coarse affairs conducted with expediency and compromise in a spirit of dog eats dog and a total absence of values that political parties, at a later stage and higher level, enshrine as their manifestos. The saviours of the lower castes will think nothing of converting their voters into purchasable commodities; the saviours of democracy will think nothing of spreading disinformation and manipulating to the hilt; the proponents of Mandal will temporarily abandon their most cherished dream; class politics and rational positions of the Left will be forgotten with promises to woo the middle classes; inner-party rivalries will thrive and discipline be stretched to severe strain in even the most cohesive political party.

Even when aware of all this, the intellect in all of us -development workers, academicians, concerned bureaucrats, the press, and even senior politicians who have lost sight of (and indeed the need for) the lowest in their party rungs- shudders and protests. We say, "Yes, but..." and go on to conjure idyllic scenes of local and decentralised self-government. This is one subject which sends everyone into hype with private flights of fancy and statements of grandiose visions. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment which provided the form and substance

for the GP '93 Elections was no exception. Neither, for that matter, was the decision of the BCS to participate in them and place issues to the forefront⁴.

In their confusion the decision makers sometimes feel it better to conduct these elections with party tickets and sometimes not. This time it was altruistically decided, without giving any credence to political reality, that local body elections should be “de-politicised” and no party tickets should be given. Though ostensibly there were no party symbols this time, it was an accepted fact that every candidate was supported by one political party or the other.

Later on, this caused a lot of confusion with every political party vastly exaggerating their respective performances and making claims of victories which just could not be verified except, perhaps, at the very local micro level. In this sense, the GP '93 Elections did not fully serve its role of testing and converting myths of perceived strengths into real political bases.

3.2. The Running of Local Bodies

What happens immediately after a strongly contested local body election is truly a study in transformation which will put any self respecting chameleon to shame. Gone will be the parochial traits and individual ugliness, immediately after winning. Elected members will acquire a sheen of respectability, swear unswerving loyalties to the policies and principles of their respective political parties and personages, and sincere apologies for their immediately preceding behaviour will be profuse and forthcoming. And, quite ironically, most of these elected members will stay true to making the local bodies function at reasonable levels of efficiency and at the societally accepted standard of malpractice.

If one can go with the stream and accept this “field reality” as a necessary price to pay in democracy, local bodies do indeed give a tremendous opportunity to do a lot of good work and gives ample scope to learn and practice positive politics. It is only to *enter into it* that one gets thoroughly sullied.

3.3. What did the BCS gain by its participation?

We have tried to explain how local body elections are the basic building blocks for participation in parliamentary democracy. By its decision to participate in these elections and the ensuing success it had in capturing 49% of the seats with 44% of the popular vote, contesting Coolie candidates did for the BCS exactly what village touts do for their political parties. The Coolie candidates actualised on pieces of scattered myths and realities -real and perceived Coolie strengths- to build the BCS into a body with political teeth and presence in the taluk.

As a result of their successful contest, the BCS grew into a *body politic* and is in a better position to lobby Coolie interests and get the job done. It also creates a more congenial and peaceful milieu for Coolies in the villages *vis-à-vis* their traditional “enemies”. Such strength, even though it results in very tangible results and improves the overall material and non-material quality of day to day Coolie life, cannot be mechanistically measured. It is, as we have just suggested, the translation of a fine combination of interwoven myths and realities which results in an overall perception of strength. It can best be gauged by the attitudes of one's enemies...

Such strength is what slowly pushes secondary social institutions into more primary positions, gradually subsuming all other institutions like marriage, family and lifestyle, and influencing them with values which it considers as important. It is no exaggeration to state that the Coolie Sangha has, in Bagepalli taluk, almost elevated itself to be a keen contestant against the domineering primary social institution of Caste itself.

⁴ Please see our paper entitled “Attempt made by the Coolies of Bagepalli to enter into the Mandal Panchayats” written in January 1988 where we too have questioned the validity of political parties “interfering” in civic matters.

Just as wherewithal like assets, capital, membership and coverage have contributed to the physical strength of the BCS, the hundreds of village based political struggles which together constituted the GP '93 contest have contributed to its social strength and standing.

As to whether local bodies captured and controlled by Coolie candidates will work any better or differently from the others is still to be seen. Besides the personal integrity of individual Coolies who have come to power and the social control exerted on them by their respective CSUs and Mahila Meetings, many other factors are also involved. These include the availability of funds in the Gram Panchayats⁵, the overall level of public tolerance with regard to corruption and malpractice, and many others. But at a more superficial level it can safely be assumed that Member Coolie families will gain far more than others in terms of civic services and public amenities.

3.4. Unanimous Seats

The decision of the BCS to contest immediately made everyone quickly gauge their respective strengths and decide not to contest certain seats where the outcome was more or less certain. This happened in 8 of the 12 Gram Panchayats. The CSUs and their allies (those with whom electoral alliances were forged) were the major winners, bagging 20 of the 29 uncontested seats. And as a result, only 145 seats were left in the fray.

Who got the Unanimous Seats?

Gram Panchayat	Villages covered	Total seats	CSU	Allies	Opposition	Total Unanimous
Thimmampalli	25	19	1	1	1	3
Gorthapalli	14	11		5	2	7
Margankunte	9	13				
Tholapalli	21	13				
Somnathpura	16	14	3			3
Naremaddepalli	12	12		1	1	2
Nallagutlapalli	17	13	1		1	2
Puligal	17	13		1	1	2
Palyakere	15	13				
Julapalya	31	21	2	2	3	7
Kanagamakalapalli	23	15	3			3
Yellampalli	22	17				
12 Gram Panchayats	205	174	10	10	9	29

3.5. Reservations

A very unique and interesting feature of the GP '93 Elections was that 83% of the seats were reserved for different categories based on gender and ethnicity. This automatically barred those who did not belong to these categories from contesting. Only 17% of the seats were left unreserved, in the General Category. 46% of the seats were reserved for Women and only 54% were left Open.

28%	Scheduled Castes	17%	Open	11%	Women
10%	Scheduled Tribes	3%	Open	7%	Women
32%	Backward Classes & Minorities	17%	Open	15%	Women
30%	General Category	17%	Open	13%	Women

⁵ The Act indicates that most of the finances will be at the Taluk Panchayat level and not in the Gram Panchayats.

“Open” meant “Men” and not a single woman contested in an Open Category anywhere in the taluk. Similarly, “General” became synonymous for “Upper Castes” and only the CSUs fielded SC/ST candidates in the 17% Open General Category.

As a result, whatever may have been the altruistic intentions behind these reservations -and we do realise that the debate can go on endlessly- the fact is that it had the result of *putting everyone in their places*. Of course, even the giving of any place at all to certain categories like SC/ST and Women was resented by many a politician. The postponement of elections in 2 Gram Panchayats was precisely on this score with someone challenging the reservation for a particular seat in the Karnataka High Court.

3.6. Loose Alliances with the Ryots

After 2 full days of discussions in the BCS Meeting of December 1993, an alliance of sorts with candidates supported by a particular political party was decided upon. The Coolies decided that though this decision held valid for the taluk as a whole, they would not strictly enforce it. Each CSU and Mahila Meeting was given the option to assess their own local situation before they decided to either join hands with non-members fielded by this political party or go it alone. But allying with candidates supported by other political parties was centrally ruled out by the BCS. Except at Julapalya where a few politically immature Coolies from the newer CSUs rebelled against it in a few constituencies, this central dictum of the BCS was generally followed.

Most CSUs and Mahila Meetings in the newer villages (31 villages are in the Formation phase) where the myth of Coolie Sangha strength was still not tested, decided to go it alone without any seat adjustments with non CSU Members. But in the older CSUs where everyone knew exactly how much real strength the Coolies had, they decided to form alliances with non-member candidates.

As a result of this rather loose policy on alliances, perfect seat adjustments without any overlap took place in only 7 of the 12 GPs. In the remaining 5 Gram Panchayats there was some overlap. CSU candidates and their allies contested each other for particular seats even though they had an understanding at the GP level. This resulted in a total of 160 CSU and allied candidates contesting 145 seats - 15 more than necessary.

Later, the results showed that our allies were the ones who gained from this rather loose arrangement. They won 45 of the 63 seats, translating 71% of their contests into victory. Whereas the CSUs won only 41 of the 97 contested seats, resulting in a poor 42% translation. Their astute experience had made them choose the so-called “sure seats”, leaving the doubtful ones to politically immature Coolies.

The Constituencies of the Gram Panchayats where the contests took place

Gram Panchayat	Settlements covered	Total Contests	CSU Coverage in the GP	Contests by CSUs	Contests by Allies
Thimmampalli	25	16	54%	15	4
Gorthapalli	14	4	29%	4	1
Margankunte	9	13	29%	5	8
Tholapalli	21	13	26%	7	6
Somnathpura	16	11	25%	10	1
Naremaddepalli	12	10	23%	8	2
Nallagutlapalli	17	11	18%	8	3
Puligal	17	11	15%	2	9
Palyakere	15	13	34%	11	2
Julapalya	31	14	33%	10	8
Kanagamakalapalli	23	12	47%	10	4
Yellampalli	22	17	7%	7	15
12 Gram Panchayats	205	145	27%	97	63

3.7. Selection of Candidates

The selection of CSU candidates was done by the respective CSUs and Mahila Meetings themselves. We have noticed a very peculiar pattern in the selection process. Some CSUs have deliberately chosen to field weak candidates, deliberately bypassing the more capable ones. On reflection, we feel that this may have been motivated by some sort of a misguided concept of representation. They seem to have got it into their heads that while Leaders could be strong and unchallenged, Representatives, on the other hand, should be weak persons who would constantly report to them and act on guidance. This is an overtly idealistic position which smacks of political naiveté to the extreme, and is one of the main reasons for the low translation of contests into victories.

A plausible reason for this naive position is that Coolies have, over the years, found it against their interest to elect strong personalities as CSU Representatives. They would rather have 3 people who genuinely represent their opinions in the Cluster Meets and BCS Meeting than someone who will dominate all and every CSU affair. Extending this same reasoning to the wider world has been their folly.

3.8. CSU Rebels

But on the other hand, when someone from their ranks rebelled and filed his candidate as a Rebel the CSUs have, by and large, been unable to do anything about it. CSU Rebel candidates -those who had stood against candidates selected by their CSUs and Mahila Meetings- sprung up in 5 of the 12 Gram Panchayats. On the whole, CSU Rebels fared very well, bagging 7% of the total seats. In terms of translations into wins they did extremely well, winning 12 of the 23 seats they contested.

3.9. Booth⁶ Alliances

Another type of alliance was inevitable due to the particular nature of the electoral system. Each Gram Panchayat was divided into constituency booths. And each such booth was assigned 1, 2 or 3 seats. After removing those constituencies where candidates had been unanimously elected, the 145 contests took place in 75 constituency booths. Of these, 21 were single seat constituency booths and therefore no alliances were needed -the candidates could approach the voters and ask for single votes. But the remaining 54 were 2 seat and 3 seat booths. This meant that an alliance of sorts had to be locally forged by candidates from these 54 constituency booths -each candidate had to ask for 2 or 3 votes- since they had to approach the same block of voters.

⁶ A Booth is a polling station, covering a cluster of small settlements or even a single village.

How true were the Booth Alliances?

Gram Panchayat	Total Contests	Constituency Booths	True Alliances	False Alliances	Single Seats
Thimmampalli	16	9	6	1	2
Gorthapalli	4	2	2		
Margankunte	9	6	3	1	2
Tholapalli	21	7	1	5	1
Somnathpura	13	6	1	3	2
Naremaddepalli	10	5	2	1	2
Nallagutlapalli	15	6	3	1	2
Puligal	15	7	3	1	3
Palyakere	15	6	3	2	1
Julapalya	24	8	3	1	4
Kanagamakalapalli	20	6		4	2
Yellampalli	22	7	3	4	
12 Gram Panchayats	145	75	30	24	21

The results -votes polled by each candidate- showed that 30 of these alliances were true and each in a set of 2-3 candidates has polled more or less evenly. But 24 such alliances were false where candidates have fudged on each other and, at the last minute, asked the voters for single votes. We will now go on to examine who fudged whom.

Polling brought out the fact that though CSU Candidates form booth alliances between themselves at the start of the electoral process, these do not survive the ordeals of a rough and tumble 3 week election campaign. The pattern is not very different when between 2-3 CSU Candidates or when between a CSU Candidate and a non-member who she has declared as an ally. But when these allies themselves forge alliances among each other, they tend to stick through rough waters right upto polling date.

Who Fudged in Booth Alliances?

Gram Panchayat	CSU Candidates Alone		CSU & Allies		Allies Alone	
	True	False	True	False	True	False
Thimmampalli	6	1				
Gorthapalli	2	-				
Margankunte			2	1	1	-
Tholapalli	-	2	-	2	2	-
Somnathpura	1	3				
Naremaddepalli	1	-	1	1		
Nallagutlapalli	1	-	2	1		
Puligal			1	-	2	1
Palyakere	3	2				
Julapalya	1	-	2	1		
Kanagamakalapalli	-	2	-	1	-	1
Yellampalli	1	2	2	2		
12 Gram Panchayats	16	12	10	9	5	2

The reason for the difference in performance is evident. Alliances between non-members are based on long tested personal friendships. But alliances between CSU Candidates are forced upon them by the respective CSUs and Mahila Meetings which comprise the constituency booth -i.e. alliance partners are not the personal choices of the candidates themselves.

3.10. The Final Tally

The Coolies and their allies together contested all 145 of the 175 seats (29 had been won unanimously without contest). Together they won 66 seats - 41 by CSU members and 45 by allies. Along with the 20 they had won unanimously, the final tally went up to 86 seats, a shade under half the seats. This resulted in an outright capture of 5 GPs, getting control of 4

GPs along with non committed independents who they will woo to their side, and defeat in 3 GPs.

This means that, except in 4-6 CSUs of Gulur Hobli where CSU Rebels messed matters up⁷, Member Coolie families have not only voted as single blocks, but they have also been able to attract substantial non Member Coolie family votes.

The Coolies and their allies have together polled 44% of the popular vote in Gram Panchayats where CSU coverage is markedly less at 27%. This showing is even more spectacular when one considers that this coverage figure of 27% is only in villages with CSUs, whereas most constituencies cover villages without CSUs as well.

It is impossible to categorically state that the alliance alone has resulted in the increased votes. In fact, though we tried very hard, it was impossible for us to even calculate which alliance partner pulled in what percentage of votes. This is because we found the booth alliances to represent something far different from the arithmetic total of the strength of the respective candidates in them. We also found that high percentages of the popular vote have not always translated into seats. Sometimes when the opposition is split, even a much lower vote has resulted in more number of seats.

The Final Tally

Gram Panchayat	Total Seats	Won* by CSUs	Won* by Allies	Won* by Rebels	Won* by Opposition
Thimmampalli	19	(15) 4	(4) 1	(6) 6	8
Gorthapalli	11	(4) 1	(1) 6	(1) 1	3
Margankunte	13	(5) 1	(8) 6	(1) 1	5
Tholapalli	13	(7) 3	(6) 3	(1) 0	7
Somnathpura	14	(10) 8	(1) 1	(2) 0	5
Naremaddepalli	12	(8) 5	(2) 3	(2) 0	4
Nallagutlapalli	13	(8) 1	(3) 2	(3) 3	7
Puligal	13	(2) 2	(9) 7	(1) 0	4
Palyakere	13	(11) 4	(2) 0	(1) 0	9
Julapalya	21	(10) 5	(8) 5	(3) 0	11
Kanagamakalapalli	15	(10) 6	(4) 4		5
Yellampalli	17	(7) 1	(15) 7	(2) 1	8
12 Gram Panchayats	174	(97) 41	(63) 45	(23) 12	76
	100%	24%	26%	7%	43%

* Including the unanimous seats won without contest.
 Figures in parenthesis show the number of contests.

In straight contests at Palyakere GP, for example, where there was no alliance with anyone, and moreover the opposition was united to defeat CSU candidates, Coolies polled 41% of the votes with a coverage of 34%. Similarly in Somnathpura GP where coverage was only 25% but the Coolies polled 49% of the votes without any alliance. And in Naremaddepalli with only a token alliance the Coolies polled 48% of the votes with a 23% coverage.

⁷ Rebels seriously messed matters up at Thimmampalli and Nallagutlapalli GPs where they succeeded in persuaded their entire CSUs to rebel against the BCS.

Votes got by CSUs and allies and their translation into victories

CSUs' Coverage	Popular Vote got	Gram Panchayat	Total seats	Seats won by Alliance	Translated into wins
54%	37%	Thimmampalli	19	5	26%
29%	40%	Gorthapalli	11	8	64%
29%	48%	Margankunte	13	6	46%
26%	46%	Tholapalli	13	6	46%
25%	49%	Somnathpura	14	9	64%
23%	48%	Naremaddepalli	12	8	67%
18%	39%	Nallagutlapalli	13	3	23%
15%	47%	Puligal	13	9	69%
34%	41%	Palyakere	13	4	31%
33%	39%	Julapalya	21	10	48%
47%	45%	Kanagamakalapalli	15	10	67%
7%	43%	Yellampalli	17	8	47%
27%	44%	12 Gram Panchayats	174	86	49%

3.11. Aftermath

As after all keenly contested electoral struggles, a bitter-sweet residue lingered when probing post-mortem exercises were conducted to determine who voted for whom, why someone rebelled, or what prompted someone else to behave the way they did. The BCS had to, for example, allow itself to be persuaded by the Rebels and accept their apology for excesses committed in the heat of the moment for otherwise everyone would be losers. This alone required crafty negotiations.

Such exercises normally take a month or two and are also intermittent with soul searching questions as to whether one should have got into the mess at all! January 1994 was spent in tasting wounds and victories. We are not going into all these in this Progress Report. Instead we will try to comment on the more serious aftermath of such a huge and broad based political struggle of the Coolies⁸.

The Coolies had decided to place politics in the back seat and give primacy to attacking ethnicity and promoting gender parity, as preconditions to create a congenial milieu for Coolie entrepreneurship. In line with this decision, the BCS Secretary had declared his agenda as the introduction of fiscal discipline. But elections need far more than a cursory attention and everyone got immersed in the heady and exhilarating details of selecting candidates, canvassing for votes, making politically expedient compromises and questionable concessions to gain votes. The GP '93 elections, in a word, upset the self imposed agenda of the Coolie Sangha to become strict and unsparing.

To bring the mood back to the more nitty gritty details of running the CCFs and accompanying individual businesses was very difficult. For the very first time in the 9 year history of the CCFs, repayment rates dropped below 85%, putting 15% of the capital -about Rs 2.2 million- at serious risk. Unbelievably trivial and extraneous reasons, ranging from the victory of the officially sponsored candidates to the defeat of rebel candidates, were cited for not repaying their loan instalments!

It became painfully clear that though at a consciously and seriously meditated collective level the Coolies had opted for fiscal discipline and positive entrepreneurship, this was not spontaneously close to the hearts of at least a third of the membership. Calls were given by a few till now responsible members to not repay CCF loans and a handful of borrowers actually tried to

⁸ It must be noted that simultaneous contests took place in Chickballapur, Siddalaghatta and Chintamani taluks as well.

dismantle their enterprises and sell off assets. It was senselessness to the extreme and unbelievable hilt.

After a whole month of trying to stem the ebb, the elected functionaries of the BCS -the 22 Cluster Secretaries and BCS Secretary- just gave up and the personality of ADATS was called out. In a series of hard hitting speeches which culminated in a walk out from the February 1994 BCS Meeting by the Project Director, the Coolies were asked to come back to their senses or, if they had the courage, to officially abandon the entrepreneurship agenda and slogan. They had to either stop being such terrible bores or settle for the mundane objective of “strength in unity and numbers”. We said that the BCS had achieved far more than most NGO propped up people’s organisations and if they were satisfied with the base strength they had achieved, we had no problems in advancing our withdrawal by 14 months.

At the time of writing this Progress Report in the last week of February 1994, the situation is fast returning to normal. But it will be very unfair and misleading if we were to not mention that more than 1,500 borrowers voluntarily repaid their crop loans and other instalments well in time and are seriously on the road to becoming “Rich in 3 Years!”.

While we do confess to being agitated by the events of the last 2 months, we were not, at the same time, overtly worried by these happenings. We knew that withdrawal was not the prize we were offering at the end of a perfect relationship. We had never considered withdrawal as the handing over of a perfect system which the Coolies would delicately preserve like rare porcelain. It is merely the next inevitable step in the process of the development of a people.

Now, another new lesson has been learnt by the Coolies. That they will have to pause the CCFs from time to time whenever the fervour stales. They have realised that economic processes need to be guided and steered - not implemented. These are skills that, once learnt, the BCS will be able to perform far better than ADATS which is, after all, only an NGO which by definition is geared to and endowed with efficient implementation skills.

4. DISCUSSIONS ON NGO WITHDRAWAL

4.1. The Farm Meetings

During the months of February, March and April 1993, we held a series of 3 day reflections for groups of Coolies from each of the 22 Clusters at the BCS’ 42 acre Farm near Bagepalli. They reflected on the 15 year history of Coolie Sangha building in their villages and went through documents like recent Progress Reports and the Endowment Application. The key theme for the entire session was the feminisation of poverty.

A total of 710 Coolies from 100 CSUs attended these meetings which were held every week for 2½ months and chaired jointly by the BCS President and the previous BCS Secretary. All those who attended these so-called Farm Meetings (an average of 3 Representatives, the VHW and 3 senior members attended from each CSU) came prepared with clear mandates from their respective CSUs and Mahila Meetings to discuss details and commit themselves to concrete plans for ADATS withdrawal and the taking over of specific responsibilities.

4.2. 3rd Opinions from Dr Nath, Anil Chaudhary and M.K. Bhat

When Dr Nath from FAIR, New Delhi, visited us from 2nd to 4th June 1993 for a 3 day session with senior ADATS staff and BCS functionaries, he was most impressed with the utter commitment that the Coolies had to ADATS withdrawal by March 1995. They did not see it as just another stage of NGO intervention, but as a vital prerequisite for democratisation. Without this taking of their destinies into their own hands they felt that they would not be able to develop any further. Financial considerations were important, they felt, but would not determine the agenda in any way.

Dr Nath helped clarify how we development workers could continue to have a personal relationship with the BCS even after withdrawal. We could become a conduit for fresh outside knowledge to continually reach the independent BCS and also, at the same time, inform the outside world as to what was happening in an independently managed people's organisation.

Anil Chaudhary, formerly of PRIA, New Delhi, made 2 visits to Bagepalli in May and July 1993, each for 4-5 days. Once again, the Coolies would not allow either the concept or the timetable for withdrawal to be negotiated. Instead he helped the Coolies to explore what their role would be in influencing future ADATS policies even after they stopped having a formal funding relationship with us. Along with Anil, the Bagepalli Coolies were able to explore as to what their role would be in helping to build new CSUs in the extension taluks.

Dr M.K. Bhat of BCO/NOVIB could not physically visit Bagepalli during the past 1 year. But he carefully went through relevant documents and had numerous sessions with the core staff of ADATS to explore what the political implications of withdrawal would be. It was Dr Bhat who suggested that the concept of an effective minority should be expanded to include a concept of an effective coverage.

4.3. Other Visits

On 23 March 1993, 100 tribals from Accord in Gudalur, the Nilgiris, came to spend 4 days with us to see the stage at which the BCS was. These tribals have come many times in the past and have come to identify themselves very closely with the Coolies of Bagepalli. They were very fascinated that their organisation was also at a near similar stage but had not yet seriously considered NGO withdrawal as the next necessary step for authentic development.

In April 1993 we had the visit of Ms. Ardi Braken from the Ministry for Development Cupertino (DGIS), Royal Netherlands Government. Once again the Member Coolie families and BCS functionaries used the opportunity to explain why NGO withdrawal and their managing the people's organisation by themselves was so important.

On 28 June we had the 1 day visit of Mr. Hassan Zaffer and Ms. Roksana from NOVIB's Bangladesh office. The very next day, Dr Dietz and Mr. Put from Amsterdam University dropped in to see the long term results of DLDP works undertaken from 1987-89 during the 1st phase of land development.

From 4-6 July 1993, Berry Roelofs of ICCO visited us for 2 days. After quickly finishing our bilateral work, he too discussed withdrawal and the setting up of an Endowment Fund for the BCS with all the Cluster Secretaries and senior BCS functionaries.

Ms. Anuradha Talwar from JSK was with us from 17-24 July to make and impact assessment study on ADATS' policy of positive discrimination in favour of Coolie women and the Mahila Meetings.

And finally, on 25 November 1993, we had the joint visit of Julia Ekong from EZE and Toon Schampers from NOVIB. After an entire day's discussions on withdrawal and endowment, we made a quick visit to Guttapalya village in the Gulur Area where over 3,000 Coolies had gathered to hear their opinion on the matter.

5. STATUTORY PREPARATIONS FOR WITHDRAWAL

On 18 January 1993 the BCS formally applied to the Union Home Ministry, New Delhi, for registration under the FCRA. This was important in order to receive any contributions that a foreign donor may make to their Endowment Fund and also to enable ADATS to formally transfer properties like the 42 acre farm, the poultry farm, etc. into the name of the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA. Though they still have not received their FCRA number, we are confident that it will come through in the next months.

Both the leading banks in the taluk, Canara Bank and the State Bank, have started working on the best terms they can provide if and when a corpus fund is placed with them in Fixed Deposit. And the Income Tax authorities have been sounded on the possible creation of such a fund.

6. FINANCING THE FUTURE

After a lot of discussions and clarifications there is still a huge uncertainty about our 3 northern partners contributing to the creation of an Endowment Fund of Rs 25 million for the BCS. Since the date for forming such an endowment (March 1994) is rapidly approaching, ADATS and the Coolies have begun exploring other possibilities.

6.1. Sangha Funds

Ideally, Sangha Funds should be the instrument through which Coolies self-finance their organisation after NGO withdrawal. If the slogan to “Become Rich in 3 Years!” works, if every member family earns an assured monthly income of Rs 1,000 and if they contribute 10% of this income to their Sangha Funds, then the BCS will not be in the quandary it now is in. But will this happen? And what till it happens? Let us go on to examine the figures.

Of the totally accrued Sangha Fund of Rs 4,015,812 as on 18 February 1994, only Rs 3,078,354 belongs to the Old, Chelur and Gulur Areas of Bagepalli taluk from where ADATS is withdrawing by March 1995. The balance of Rs 937,458 belongs to the Extension Areas.

Even with a present average monthly income of Rs 500 per member family, Sangha Fund collections should be in the region of Rs 2 million per annum. We had therefore conservatively projected a contribution of Rs 1 million for the fiscal year 1993-94. But actual collections have only been Rs 426,397 which is less than half our already conservative target. The Coolies are therefore contributing only 2.5% of their income to the Sangha Funds, against the call to give 10%. This is a drastic drop from the performance of previous years.

In January 1993, we had projected the amount needed to run the independent BCS at Rs 3.36 million per annum. The interest earnings from past savings will meet less than 10% of this requirement. Moreover, many of these requirements are centrally needed, whereas interest earnings from the village Fixed Deposits will be spread out over 123 CSUs.

But interest earnings are not the only annual income that the CSUs have. Current year collections, along with interest earnings from previous years' unspent amounts, comprise the net income from Sangha Funds. Therefore Sangha Funds may cover upto 20% of the annual requirement. But whichever way we look at the figures, Sangha Funds alone are not enough to finance the BCS.

Sangha Funds in Village CSU Accounts

Fixed Deposits		2,560,075	
Add Interest earnings	256,007		
Add Collections during year	363,028		
Less Expenses during year	<u>331,980</u>		
Balance in S.B. Accounts		<u>287,055</u>	
Total			2,843,993

<u>Sangha Funds in Taluk level Accounts</u>		
Fixed Deposits		226,315
Add Interest earnings	22,631	
Add Collections during year	63,369	
Less Expenses during year	<u>69,517</u>	
Balance in S.B. Accounts		<u>16,783</u>
Total		<u>234,361</u>
Total Sangha Funds		3,078,354

These will earn an interest of Rs 307,835 from 1994-95 when placed in Fixed Deposits at 10% p.a. on 31 March 1994

When discussing the reasons for the fall in Sangha Fund collections, most of the men were silent. But many Mahila Meetings have come up with a warped reason which we fail to fully comprehend. They say that uncertainty over the creation of the Endowment Fund has caused Coolies to contribute less since no one has still worked out, in their own minds, how the BCS is going to continue without such an Endowment Fund.

There could be, as we have just said, a warped truth in this observation. But we wonder, if pinch comes to bite and the Endowment Fund does not come through, whether the Coolies will reassess the situation and start contributing more to their Sangha Funds as the only way to keep the BCS going? Indeed, the question then becomes whether they really want to keep the BCS going. But are we justified in testing matters in this manner?

6.2. Farm and Poultry

The 42 acre farm which we had bought for the BCS in January 1988 was paid for by the Coolies themselves from wage savings they made during the implementation of the DLDP 1st phase (land development) project in Bagepalli taluk. ADATS invested on this land to develop it into a fruit orchard run on organic lines. Any such venture needs at least 8-10 years to start generating surplus. In the meantime, it is still a drain on resources to the tune of about Rs 30,000 per month.

The Poultry is another asset created with EZE and NOVIB assistance. At first we reared Giriraja chicken as a social project to help women. Then we tried our hand at rearing broilers. But the market was far too shrewd for us and we went into a net loss. Finally, we decided to lease it out to a huge poultry conglomerate for Rs 20,000 per month. By March 1995, this rental income will help us recoup the loss we made when rearing broilers and from April 1995, rental income from the Poultry will meet a substantial part of the 42 acre Farm's maintenance bill.

Once the 42 acre Farm becomes productive by about 1996-98, the BCS should get a net profit of about Rs 50,000 every month from it, and another Rs 20,000 from the poultry, at today's prices. But we have always considered the Farm and Poultry as asset creation ventures and not just as income generation ones. Investments on both these assets have already doubled over the past 6 years. The value is bound to continue rising.

But in the Coolies' immediate reckoning, the Poultry and Farm still represent a compulsory expenditure rather than income.

7. MAHILA MEETINGS

The participation of Coolie women in Coolie Sangha matters has gone unabated these past 16 months. The GP '93 Elections gave an excellent opportunity for the women to themselves select their candidates without male interference since 46% of the seats were reserved for women. But Mahila Meetings also suffered the same affliction as their male colleagues and

many failed to select strong and efficient candidates. This malady has been commented on earlier in this Report.

Special reflection sessions were organised throughout the period for women, and one of the major thesis during the “Farm Meetings” was the feminisation of poverty. This is a concept that each and every Coolie woman is fully aware of and committed to prevent.

Vokkaku Sanchi Duddu moneys were replenished in August 1993, immediately after the joint Evaluation. Every Mahila Meeting was asked to submit a resolution stating how much of their Rs 5,000 they had “lost” during the past years -i.e. given to women who had spent the amounts and been unable to repay. We deliberately said that we did not need to know the gory reasons as to how and why these moneys had been “lost”. Surprisingly most Mahila Meetings reported back that they did not want any replenishment, and the maximum claims were in the range of Rs 700 to Rs 1,000. This indicates that not only is the money being responsibly re-olved by the women, but also that they are sincere and serious without waiting for chances to merely *grab as much as possible* from the NGO.

An acute problem facing all the Mahila Meetings is that they do not have any balances in their decentralised health budgets. They cannot pay Village Health Worker stipends, buy basic medicines to render first aid, or refer serious patients for treatment at hospitals. The cost of medical treatment has, in the meantime, soared with the Government Hospital providing nothing at all except free services of doctors and nurses.

The situation becomes really pathetic when sick patients and their relatives come to our central office at Bagepalli and literally beg for help. But apart from providing ambulance services to haul patients to and from the villages, there is absolutely nothing that we can do. In January 1993, when writing the Endowment Application, we had predicted that the 2 year period 1993-95 -till Endowment Fund interest earnings start coming in- would be a very difficult one. But we had not, at that time, anticipated that matters would become so very acute.

8. SKILL TRAINING

8.1. For Coolie youth

The skill training programme for Coolie youth had to be abandoned for want of funds. But all those who went to Bangalore to work in garment factories -including a large number of girls- are still there, earning handsome salaries of between Rs 1,500 and Rs 2,000 a month.

This is an activity which we are convinced should continue for many more years. To train a Coolie youth for 3 months costs us about Rs 4,000. And successful trainees can earn the amount in 3-4 months once they are placed in a well paying factory jobs. But we are faced with the same attitudinal block prevalent the world over -the dilemma of people simply refusing to pay for education. Suggestions to give the trainees soft loans through the CCFs get only a polite hearing.

Another reason for their reluctance to invest in training could be that because the viability of such an investment has not been fully demonstrated as yet. 35 youth being successfully placed in Bangalore is not all that much for the Coolies to go by. Perhaps if we were to run the programme for another year, train 90 more youth through 3 batches and place them too in paying jobs, this may be the spur needed for the Coolies to financially participate.

8.2. For Coolie women

Another type of skill training which we would have liked to undertake is for Coolie women to supplement their incomes by learning skills which will attract outside entrepreneurs to come

in and organise production and marketing. Quite a number of such entrepreneurs have already approached us, but once again paucity of funds has put a break on these efforts.

9. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We have entered the final year of Coolie Sangha Consolidation efforts in Bagepalli taluk. The BCS may benefit from a few concluding comments we have to make.

9.1. The individualism which is lacking...

Experiences of the past 16 months demonstrate that while the Coolie Sangha has the collective discipline to be true to its intents and purposes, many Coolies tend to fail as individuals when given free choices to do whatever they please. It would be self deceptive to claim that they are only a small minority because they do have the power to influence the silent majority who seem to be content with waiting in the sidelines, as it were; waiting to see who wins... If these few unsavoury characters truly represented only a minority aberration, they would long since have been weeded out by the CSUs. The truth is that a cohesiveness which influences the individual trait has not yet developed.⁹

A whole lot has been achieved in terms of building lasting unity, but individual Coolies have not yet developed to the same degree. Whether it be the just about average showing in the GP '93 Elections with a poor translation of 42% of the contests into victory; or the phenomenon of CSU Rebel candidates; or the recent hiccup in CCF repayments; they all go to show that while the CSUs are able to function efficiently and deliver results as bodies of poor people, individual Coolies tend to foul matters up.

A lot can be achieved by groups of people through strength in unity and numbers. To some extent these achievements will even lead to a minor readjustment of village society in favour of the acting groups. But there is a definite ceiling to increasing wages, getting back lost lands, putting a stop to the practice of untouchability, or whatever. Beyond that very definite ceiling, nothing more can be achieved and such groups can, at the most, defend their hard earned gains.

Attacking parochial ethnicity, promoting gender parity and encouraging positive entrepreneurship in Coolie families, on the other hand, are not agendas which can be undertaken by bands of people. They require, as a fundamental precondition, individual enlightenment and the personal commitment of each and every participating member.

...individualism will be promoted

Conversely, and here comes the Catch-22 situation, the pursuit of such lofty goals is the very thing which will promote a healthy and positive individualism in a people. The BCS must have the patience to see through the downs along with the ups. It is far easier for decent people to deal with the ups (all that is required is the sensitivity to not develop head weight and undue arrogance) than to deal with desolation and feelings of defeat.

The simultaneous development of and, inversely, using the quality of positive individualism in a people is a slow and painstaking process. The BCS needs to develop the ability to be patient without, at the same time, permitting irreparable mistakes to be made; patient without, at the same time, getting labelled as idealistic fools.

⁹ Please see our draft incomplete paper entitled "Furthering the Coolie Sangha Model of Development" written in October 1988.

9.2. The need to understand the CCFS as a complex and interlocking strategy

Activities like the village level CCFs can no longer be viewed as simple credit giving mechanisms which, once set in place, will keep on running. They are complex and thoroughly integrated attempts to grapple with very high and worthwhile objectives. While the detailed and almost finicky monitoring of the CCFs must certainly continue unabated, the larger political purpose must dictate policy decisions to, for example, put them on temporary hold if and when necessary.

Coolies cannot be *made* rich in 3 years. Nor can their family incomes be raised to Rs 1,000 a month through the careful implementation of a master plan. These are far reaching economic changes that are aimed at. Such economic processes have to be carefully guided and steered. As already mentioned earlier in this Report, the BCS is better endowed than ADATS to play this role.

9.3. An internal study to place everything in perspective

It may be a good idea for the BCS to immediately embark on an internal study to see how each individual borrower is faring with CCF loans she has taken for the past 3-4 years -i.e. ever since the *Nirupeda* lists were made and the coffers emptied in favour of the poorest of the poor, just before the commencement of the DLDP 2nd phase project.

Such a study may reveal genuine problems to be more than wilful misutilisation; or even the other way around. But more importantly it will bring back everyone's focus to questions concerning enterprise and firmly place politics once again in the back seat.

It must also be remembered that January and February are chronically problematic months as far as the CCFs are concerned. The repayment of crop loans given out to literally thousands of borrowers has never been and ever will be a smooth operation. We must refrain from forming impressionistic opinions on the CCFs during this rather tense period.