

0502. A Discussion on Collectives (Jul 1983)

Extract from a letter to NOVIB dated 15 July 1983

Discusses the social, economic and political reality that the rural poor are placed in, and examines cooperatives as an instrument that they can use for their economic empowerment, in order to sustain socio-political gains.

1. SOCIAL REALITY

The prevalent value system glorifying and sanctifying private property and its associate greed, ambition and cut throat competition will hinder plans of collectivisation. Alienation will make the concept very difficult for even Coolies with an above average intellect to accept.

Social institutions like the disintegrating joint family room to the nuclear, the vassal position of women in the families and in society, etc. are all based on, stem from, and further perpetuate this glorification of private property. The concept of collectivisation therefore finds opposition not only in the prevalent value system but also in the institutions that stem from this value system.

It would be romantic and dangerously erroneous to suggest that this value can be changed before the material fabric of society causing it can be changed all the more in isolated pocket experiments.

2. ECONOMIC REALITY

The economic fabric of class society prevents collectivisation. Enterprises that may come within the reach of the Coolies (with ADATS/NOVIB support) will necessarily be low capital ones. These may allow the enterprises to just maintain themselves without any surplus profit. In such a situation the collectivisation of the production unit and sharing of profits will not “bring enough” to satisfy everyone and keep the unit running, even if this share is marginally higher than their present earnings.

The quantitative definition of Capital is growing every day, forcing smaller units into pauperisation and increasing profits in the newly created monopoly sectors. Small units as such, therefore, have no chance of success; and their being in the hands of the poor no solution to their poverty and abject material conditions. Further it is even doubtful if these small units will go to the really poor or be cornered by the middle peasantry which is desperate enough to want them and resourceful enough to get them.

On the other hand the “taking over” of capitalistic ventures by the workers has not proved to last in places where this has been experimented. And the “democratisation of capital” has remained exclusively an ideological and tactical tool in the hands of the capitalists in order to deceive the working masses and further pauperise their petty savings which would otherwise have gone into the easing of their material burdens or their spiritual development.

3. POLITICAL REALITY

The prevailing structures do not permit collectivisation, people’s initiatives, and attempts made by dependent workers to set up “independent” ventures to earn their living. Every political institution, be it local self government (Panchayat), legal, or whatever, is designed to protect the ruling classes against such initiatives. We who have undergone severe repression know that the official propaganda and enforcement machinery will be quick to label any such effort as seditious, anti-social, anti-national, and anti-government!

The legal apparatus in class society is one that is primarily meant to protect private property. One of the farmers in a collective farm example for instance, if he decides to break away from the experiment, will claim and get through the courts of law not only his share of the land delineated to him by a court appointed executor but also an equal share in any and all investments put in during the experiment. The courts of this society are in no mood to recognise and honour any agreement to the contrary that he “may have earlier, inadvertently entered into”.

The quasi legal structures of village Panchayats and elders hold identical views even if the collectivisation experiment does not directly challenge their own cultivation or hierarchical positions.

Societal forces prepare, in capitalism, the property-less and non-property aspiring class precisely in order to smash the obsolete, regressive, property based structures that prevent further development of the productive forces. This further development of productive forces is possible only by collectivisation. But this cannot be done till the other obsolete structures supporting individualisation are smashed.

Collectivisation belongs to the next more advanced social system which has social, political and other superstructural institutions including the value system that support and propagate it. To attempt at building collectives in this society, claiming that it has an educational value in demonstrating to the people the advantages to be got in the next social order is being blind to the realities of class society.

Such experiments moreover, have succeeded only as long as money has poured in and/or the missionary zeal behind them has stayed on. Therefore the experiments have more undertones of benevolent capitalism and an iron hand than over tones of collectivisation.

4. COOPERATIVES & GENESIS OF THE DAIRY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Co-operation, on the other hand, seems to realistically demand on the unity of the Coolies and their ability to work together giving the projects a reasonable chance of success. Slowly, based on the learning and experiences of small ventures, the Coolies can venture into more ambitious attempts demanding greater unity and collective actions.

We have, through our discussions, planned a Dairy Development Project (DDP) where CSU Members will form milk collection societies in their villages, avail bank loans and procure crossbred cows. We will set up a veterinary extension service temporarily till pressure can be brought upon the Government to start mobile veterinary services and till “Barefoot Vets” can be trained in the villages. We will train the CSU members on the management of crossbred cows. The project will be managed fully by the CSUs themselves and we will have only an advisory and service rendering role in it.

The selection of the loanees, their properly utilising the loans, repaying the bank, etc. are all to be decided and controlled by the respective CSUs. The only other input we have to put is a 25 percent Seed Capital in fixed deposit with the Canara Bank in order to provide an incentive for the Bank to participate in the project. This will permit the bank to honour the choice of loanees made by the CSUs irrespective of whether the applicants have other outstanding debts or not. Otherwise the bank will be forced to insist on the prediction of No Due Certificates and there are no Coolies in this taluk who are debt free and can benefit from the DDP.

5. THE LIMITATIONS OF ECONOMIC PROJECTS

In spite of having evolved this plan we are still very clear that no economic project, collective or co-operative, can materially solve the problems of the people. It will not only marginally increase their earnings by a few rupees and this may alleviate their hardships to a little extent.

However there is truth in the observation that most of the Coolies live in abject poverty with little or no means to support their families, let alone their mass organisation. And in the light of this abject poverty it becomes very difficult to work.

Many CSU members in these past months of drought have actually borrowed a single rupee on interest to come and discuss the drought with us at Bagepalli! Poverty can surely break the back of our efforts to form a mass organisation. We recognised it acutely this summer © one of the worst droughts in recent memory. It is for this pragmatic reason that we have opted for this economic input.

We also add a word of warning for ourselves. When we attempt projects demanding even the minimum co-operative action, squabbles are bound to arise, testing our patience and tempers. Once again we must bear in mind the secondary importance of these projects (this does not in any way mean that every serious attempt will not be made to make them work properly; it is not a preconceived excuse for failure and not allow disruptions to take place in the Coolies' unity or rancour to creep into our relationship with individual defaulting members.

Also, however small the project may be, its implementation would require a lot of administrative and organisational work (even if the DDP is managed and controlled by the CSUs) and there would be little time for our other more crucial work.

Unless we constantly keep these in mind our group's priorities could get deviated with the effort to keep these projects going. To make an understatement, dextrous handling is required.