

0507. Note on Skill Training

Describes the problem, espouses a vision, and describes a plan and possibility to attract entrepreneurial capital from outside into Bagepalli taluk.

1. THE PROBLEM

Coolie dependence on agriculture has long surpassed all optimal measures of reasonable sustenance. This has led to the emergence of a so called subsistence economy where sheer existence is at subhuman levels, now threatening even paltry and underrated definitions of subsistence. The immediate future holds a grim scenario of pauper migration into slums and pavements for the young and healthy, and a wasting into destitution and death for the rest. This has formed the emotional rationale for many NGOs exploring alternate off-farm ventures.

Traditional NGO responses have, in the main, aimed at converting the rural poor themselves into petty off-farm entrepreneurs of a kind. The introduction of cottage industries and handicrafts for the urban market have failed for 2 reasons. Firstly because the low organic composition of the ventures have resulted in their risk bearing capacity looming close to zero. And secondly because the poor were not equipped to comprehend and deal with the intricacies of market forces. The crisis normally surfaced during marketing.

Coolies, whose astute instincts have got institutionalised into localised survival strategies, can effectively deal with the vagaries of the weather and fluctuating fortunes in patron-client relations. But these are totally different from the street sense needed to survive in the almost chaotic jungle of individual entrepreneurs struggling with each other in the urban market. Quite apart and different from skills needed to stitch straight and pretty, the tailor needed another canny intelligence to keep her job in an unsure venture which swayed with supply, demand and competition. It is in the imparting of this sixth sense that many skill training efforts have failed.

NGOs who themselves attempted to run employment generating ventures without separating the lines of management and holding on to the same social principles which guided their other developmental activities all ran into problems of viability sooner rather than later.

2. THE VISION

A disciplined and organised body of people like the BAGEPALLI COOLIE SANGHA can attract outside capital into the taluk, offering the social control it has over its members as a bait for good worker relations. Without promising any artificial absence of conflict, it can honestly claim to be able to quickly resolve such contentions, as and when they arise, to the reasonable satisfaction of both parties. The BCS will thereby be able to remove the immediate and often acrimonious sting which often develop into chronic irritants and only result in the eventual de-economising of a region.

Instead the BCS will be able to critically, rather than emotionally, deal with class contradictions to begin etching a better long term deal for the workers.

3. THE PLAN

Our aim is to impart skill training to 500 girls and boys, through 5 six month batches of 100 each. The 1st batch was started in August 1992 and has a strength 155 youth. We had thought that we could handle such a big number but now find that quality suffers for want of personal attention when there are too many trainees in a batch. We realise that an informal training will

be imparted to the peers and siblings of those we formally train, gradually edging the coverage percentage still higher, towards economic viability.

Though we have initially started with tailoring, we will soon diversify into other branches of the garment industry like leather works, embroidery, etc. We have simultaneously started training youth in steel fabrication, welding and motor winding in the below described unique manner.

We have stopped rearing chicken in the BCS' 12,000 bird capacity poultry sheds and instead converted the facility into a Skill Training Centre. The store room has been converted into a kitchen, a rearing shed into a dining hall, 3 more into dormitories, and other facilities have been specially built to accommodate the trainees.

Individual entrepreneurs have been invited into this Centre and offered separate sheds to start their own particular ventures, provided the specialised workers they employ in their endeavours are prepared to use our trainees as apprentices under them. Apart from the attraction of free building, water, power, and a slave like obedience from a yet unskilled work force for whose labour they do not have to pay, we offered them an additional incentive to make our offer irresistible. We would furnish each shed with machinery and equipment of their choice provided such machines could employ a reasonable number of workers and on the condition that such machinery and equipment would be the property of ADATS/BCS.

The only guarantee we refused to give the entrepreneurs was time. If, in our considered opinion, the venture did not train enough apprentices and therefore did not justify our effort and expense, we would ask the entrepreneur to please leave the centre immediately. We had no objections to their earning whatever profits they could, but our condition was that our trainees should be taught both, a practical industrial skill as well as the intangible sense needed to survive in an upcoming enterprise.

The only cash investment the entrepreneurs had to make was working capital and the salaries of specialised workers. Provided there was an unshakeable and visible guarantee of repayment, we were also prepared to offer short term interest-free loans for periods of upto a fortnight. For larger working capital, we said we would help negotiate favourable terms with nationalised banks.

ADATS' friends in the corporate sector at Bangalore participate in the scheme. They help the entrepreneurs with free managerial assistance, and open up their contacts to explore markets.

4. PRESENT STATUS

Though the scheme is in operation for only the past 4 months, there are some hopeful signs that it may succeed. 37 girls and 98 boys are presently undergoing training as apprentices under an entrepreneur from Bagepalli who has started making ready made garments with orders from wholesalers in Bangalore. Since he has sunk in nearly Rs 250,000 of his own as working capital, he is quite serious in his efforts to stay afloat. About 20 trainees are learning welding, fabrication and motor re-winding under 2 other entrepreneurs from Bagepalli.

An export garment manufacturer from Bangalore is going to start with very sophisticated technology in the next weeks. A practising lawyer from Bagepalli has finalised his plans to start a silk twisting industry.

5. THE POSSIBILITIES

The first possibility which we envisage as an outcome of the effort is that some of the entrepreneurs who start at our Skill Training Centre will go out to places of their own choice. A few of the first batch trainees would be absorbed in these ventures with familiar employers.

A majority of the initial trainees will have to go out in search of work. Hindupur (25 kms away), Yelahanka (80 kms) and Bangalore (100 kms) seem the most likely destinations. We will help make initial logistic arrangements for these youth to stay and cook in these alien towns and cities.

The second possibility is that modest industrial capital will come into taluk headquarters towns like Bagepalli, Chickballapur, Siddalaghatta and Chintamani once it is known that a skilled work force is abundantly available.

The third possibility, in that rank and order, is that local middle peasant capital will start getting converted into manufactory capital in crude imitation of earlier European barnyard commodity production. This is bound to happen due to pressures posed by the relative non viability of dry land farming in drought prone regions, as well as by the temptation offered by the availability of a skilled work force and the lure of disproportionate profits they will hope to siphon through a retention of feudal like control over the workers.

It is here that the dexterity of the BCS, which we spoke of a little earlier in this note, will be put to its severest test. The organised Coolies will either frighten off the conversion of peasant surpluses into manufactory capital, or coax it into productive use without, at the same time, allowing a weakening of the position of the workers.

6. THE PROSPECT OF CSUs STARTING THEIR OWN PRODUCTION UNITS

As to the CSUs themselves starting ventures of their own, our only position is that we will actively discourage groups of freshly trained youth from immediately applying for CCF loans to start their own production units at the end of their training.

We are convinced that, as apprentices for 6 months, they will only be trained in the most rudimentary of skills and techniques needed to survive in the manufacturing milieu. It is only after many years of working as workers that some among them may develop the ability to deal with all the contradictions of the market economy and gain confidence to start out on their own.

This will, in turn, give rise to brand new contradictions which the village level CSUs have to learn to come to grips with at that time.