

## 0511. Coolie Sangha Consolidation & Withdrawal (Aug 1995)

### OVERRIDING EFFORT TO BUILD DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES

Looking back at nearly 18 years of work with the Coolies of Bagepalli, we do get the impression that all our efforts have been directed towards the single overriding objective of democratising village society. The strategy we seem to have adopted is the building of alternate structures for the poor wherein they can practice another kind of living. The underlying faith appears to be that positive practices within these structures would, through their sheer effectiveness, begin to influence the functioning of wider society. But what are we going to be remembered as, the Aristotle of our place and time or as plain philanthropists?

The 1st paper entitled “Coolie Sangha Model of Development” was written in March 1986 and the need for building new democratic structures for the rural poor was forcefully argued. We described the philosophical basis for our involvement where we made a critique of existing democratic practices and made a clear choice in favour of a particular type of participation which was true and representative. We went on to examine our identity as development workers and the highly personalised motivation for striving to bring about this democratisation. We stated that this was the only single force capable of assisting in structural change. We then articulated our abhorrence of existing semi-feudal practices and accepted as inevitable the fact that we were working within spaces provided by capitalism. We declared that there were sufficient opportunities within the liberal framework of bourgeois society for the poor to advance their position. We listed the various steps needed to build an effective village level unity of the poor which we now call “Formation”. We believed that we had found, through organising the poor, a panacea for eradicating poverty.

That paper was written with the benefit of hindsight. It was the crystallisation of experiences and emotions that both parties, development workers and Coolies, had obtained over 8½ years. Articulating it gave us new energy by providing a single and united thrust and purpose to all our efforts. It served as a powerful impetus for ADATS’ vertical as well as horizontal growth.

The 2nd paper entitled “Coolie Sangha Formalisation” explained what had to be done in order to convert tentative achievements obtained in the previous 3 year phase into lasting accomplishments.<sup>1</sup> We listed these tentative achievements as the breaking of a fatalistic apathy, the effecting of a larger unification of an enlarged poor, and the disturbing of the political equation whereby a position of vantage was obtained by the Coolies. We clarified that this could not be done through a mere re-emphasising, even if with greater intensity, of the earlier 3 year efforts. We spoke of pluralism, which had to be consciously developed in order to foster decentralisation, as the essential condition for full Coolie participation. Once again we listed the various steps, but this time in the form of an agenda for “Formalisation”. A remarkable feature of this paper was that for the very first time it dealt with matters in a subtle manner. A linear and deterministic reduction which marked ADATS’ thinking upto that point began to disappear from our mien and vocabulary.

We wrote that paper in 1989, when we were about to enter into the 2nd phase of Coolie Sangha building in 60 villages of Chelur. 1 year later, when we were about to enter this same phase at Gulur, we saw no reason to alter it. In mid 1992, when 148 villages of the Icco sup-

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<sup>1</sup> In September 1988 we began to write another paper entitled “Furthering the Coolie Sangha Model of Development” but it never got completed.

ported Extension Programme had just completed Formation, we once again found the theory, manifestations and strategies to be just as pertinent.

This 3rd paper is being written in the form of an essay. It comes at a time when some confusion has been created by our use of the term “withdrawal”. We have used the word simply to mean the last stage or final days of the intervention strategy we had developed. But this concept cannot be properly explained unless we put the strategy itself within a larger schematic presentation of Coolie development, highlighting each stage. The time has therefore come to place the 9 year Coolie Sangha building matrix itself in a larger framework.

A similarity between this and the 1st paper is that both are written *post-haste*, after the event. It will help us to repeat the effort in the Extension taluks in a more reasoned and efficient manner. Even more, it will help us understand the new role of ADATS in Bagepalli taluk *vis-à-vis* the independent Coolie Sangha; what has in recent days come to be referred to as NGO Role Transformation.

### PRE-INTERVENTION STAGE

The material and non material conditions which prevail and determine Coolie living before NGO intervention have been exhaustively described by everyone familiar with the Indian countryside. In its first years of work ADATS, like any NGO embarking on a programme aimed at structural change, made a detailed micro analysis of this specific situation locale through a process of supporting and reflecting on Coolie struggle at the village, cluster and taluk levels.

What is important about this pre-intervention stage is that the Coolies had fine tuned both their rebellion as well as adjustment into a perfectly balanced survival strategy. This is very different from what many of us erroneously once believed to be a mute and fatalistic acceptance of oppression and dehumanisation.<sup>2</sup> It resulted in Coolie survival or, if you will, subsistence at a level which just about kept the life process going.

Some aspects of this survival strategy can be gleaned through careful and value free observation. The putting on of a debased attitude whenever dealing with the upper caste-class conglomeration, a crafty ability to play one section of the village rich against the other, having no qualms about living on charity and hand-me-downs, never fully trusting an outsider but at the same time being careful not to show this distrust, using alcohol as a release for pent up frustrations, are some such examples. But there are many other aspects which are almost impossible to discern. Take, for example, the earnings of a Harijana family. Or the economics of subsistence farming in a semi arid drought prone region like ours. These are mysteries that can never be fathomed through conventional paradigms of knowledge. They just happen and continue, guided by laws and forces that we never fully comprehend.

Equally important is to realise that this pre-intervention stage of Coolie rebellion and adjustment does not simply vanish during NGO intervention. Instead the survival strategies coexist along with the change oriented ideology propounded by the NGO. We tried to convey this sense of overlap when we spoke of the 4 Culture Model in our 2nd paper on Coolie Sangha Formalisation.

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<sup>2</sup> We ourselves believed this to be so and had to correct our stand. See the draft incomplete paper, “Furthering the Coolie Sangha Model of Development”. Though we can discern a definite direction to our thinking and understanding it has not been a clear cut and linear growth of ideas. There have been, through the years, significant shifts in our understanding.

## INTERVENTION STAGE

When the 9 year intervention strategy was offered to such a people, they were tempted to try it out for a variety of reasons. These included very obvious ones of material benefit like the redeeming of lost lands, increasing wages, getting civic services long denied to them, and also the appeal of direct economic benefits from ADATS itself. They also included non material advantage like the gaining of self respect, political recognition and a distinct identity.

This intervention strategy has been used by ADATS for a good 17½ years, at first sub consciously for the initial 8 years, and then in full and conscious measure. The whys and whereof of each activity input, when to begin it and when to end, have been thoroughly tested. This has resulted in tangible results that we can all be justifiably proud of.

### Achievements and accomplishments

14,114 Coolie families (29,356 adult Coolies) stand as normal members on the rolls of 561 functioning village CSUs. They comprise 28% of the total population of the 4 taluks. Member Coolies can count upon another 8,854 ex-Member families from an additional 129 dropped out villages, and even on sections of the neutral population (i.e. non-Coolie, non-oppressors) when it comes to tackling socio-political issues and struggles. As a result, in spite of a less-than-majority coverage, they are the largest single minority in these parts. This village strength often gets projected at the taluk level to give a perception of power which is greater than reality. It contributes to the creation of a myth of effective minority which, when employed intelligently, alters the shape of events in their favour.

The strength of the Coolie Sangha is that it is not a loose “unity at times of need” type of organisation. The discipline and systems ensure that there is a visible and functional presence in each village through the definite structures of weekly meetings, everyday activities, self finance and annual elections. The agenda of the Coolie Sangha is wide and all embracing. This cannot be attained by casual assemblies of the poor.

A larger unification of an enlarged poor has been effected. At the same time Coolies from the lower and middle castes are more attracted to belong to such groupings. The Coolie Sangha has used its strength to make impressive political gains like the capturing of Cooperative Societies, Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayat and other local bodies. This has vastly increased the quantum of civic services mobilised from the government and also improved the quality. The Coolies are able to supplement government services in a responsible manner. They implement a highly effective community and referral health activity, and also a children’s education programme to see their children through government schools.

The position of Coolie women has considerably improved though they still have a long way to go. They have begun to contribute as equals in matters pertaining to the Coolie Sangha. There are hardly any mixed meetings where there is not an equal presence and participation of women. Their exclusive fora in each village, the Mahila Meetings, run the community and referral health and children’s education activities with minimum male interference. These *in camera* meetings of women also have a veto power over financial decisions taken in the mixed CSU Meetings. They have a small revolving fund in each village which they use to meet urgent needs. Coolie women are very clear that they need to use all these instruments to combat sexual abuse and exploitation. Their aim is to enhance their positions within the family and in wider society. Deserted women and single mothers get a special attention in the Mahila Meetings and very often quickly rise within the ranks of the Coolie Sangha to occupy important positions as VHWs and elected functionaries.

The Coolie Sangha has made major economic gains in increasing agricultural wages and ensuring equal wage for women and men. It has supported tenancy struggles, got surplus lands

allotted (landlessness in Bagepalli taluk has fallen from 14% to 6%), undertaken soil and water conservation measures on 39,537 acres of Coolie owned lands, improved cultivation practices through timely crop loans and introduced sustainable land use practices. The setting up and running of decentralised and village level alternate credit structures has made possible an ambitious Coolie agenda of petty entrepreneurship with a target to “Become Rich in 3 Years!”. Coolies are now grappling with complicated problems like the symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community, the viability ceilings that agriculture and off-farm activities seem to intrinsically have in them, ways and means by which they can invite outside entrepreneurial capital, and how young people can adapt to opportunities opened up by the new economic policy by learning new skills and getting factory jobs at Bangalore.

The objective to self finance all the activities of the Coolie Sangha has existed for more than 10 years in spite of the fact that ADATS met most of their organisational expenses during the 3 building phases. Towards this end a call was given for member Coolies to contribute 10% of their earnings, from whatever source, to their village CSU bank accounts. At the end of each financial year the balance unspent amounts in each CSU were placed in Fixed Deposits in the names of the respective village units to build a decentralised corpus for the Coolie Sangha. These Sangha Funds have today accumulated to a total of Rs 7,117,647. Every rupee of this amount has been collected through *Hundis* placed at each CSU and ADATS has not contributed anything at all to it.

In December 1994, when ADATS was on the verge of withdrawing from the older CSUs of Bagepalli taluk, the Coolies decided to convert the system of voluntary contributions into a compulsory tax. Membership in the Coolie Sangha began to be based on whether a family declared their income and paid up. The 1995 experience in this regard has been promising though it is too early to predict how this call will develop in the years to come.

The net result has been the creation of a vast human infrastructure with personnel and structural wherewithal. Not only are there a whole lot of persons working in Coolie interest, but these individual efforts get channelled into a single purpose. This is an asset which can be employed for authentic Coolie development at every opportunity. It has also resulted in a cultural upheaval of sorts which is far deeper than the mechanistic deduction we normally assume with the term empowerment. Not just is it possible for the Coolies to benefit from mainstream developments, be they anti-poverty programmes or civic services or social legislation, but they are also able to shape these events, however marginally, with a flavour of their opinion.

It is not our purpose in this paper to comment at any greater length on the 3 phases which ADATS uses to build the Coolie Sangha. Our concern is to trace how the Coolies perceived and utilised them then as well as now, years after they have been developed and extensively employed. But before that we would like to comment on 2 related matters - the use of external money and the role of issues and struggles.

### External money

There can be no denying the fact that a lot of these achievements have been made with the use of external money. Though we have always argued that it is not excessively so in quantum terms when likened to other models which merit relative comparison, it cannot be denied that the Coolie Sangha Model is nevertheless a costly one. This has obvious implications when we consider replicability, geopolitical coverage, and the spread of scarce resources. But there are even more aspects which need to be touched upon.

The rather dangerous, yet obviously vital, role of external money cannot be dealt with superficially or in a simplistic manner.<sup>3</sup> Insufficient capital could reduce an effort to a non serious plane, offering more a palliative to the self actualisation agenda of development workers than to mitigate the problems of the poor. But on the other hand, is not the dishing out of moneys and setting up of projects with external resources the easiest way to claim an achievement? Large moneys have always been known to attract unsavoury characters who destroy the hard won unity of the poor with a frightening and callous ease. But on the other hand, is not unity in the face of handling money one of the best tested varieties of it? When considering very practical aspects of our work with the poor, questions relating to the role of money are endless. The very least that is expected of responsible development workers is to be fully aware of the dangers in dealing with this double edged sword.

ADATS is rather conventional when it comes to money matters. We do not believe that ideological arguments come into play when fulfilling monetary and accounting obligations. We have, for instance, always preferred to use the word “inventorisation” instead of evaluation when it comes to our northern partners performing their financial supervisory roles. We can claim in all sincerity that we have never been in awe of the size of our annual budgets without, at the same time, losing a healthy respect for funds and funding.

The principle of total and exception less transparency, specially in money matters, has held us in good stead. We have not only stated that everyone has a right to look into the accounts, but taken very many concrete steps to invite such scrutiny on a continuous and ongoing basis. We have simplified financial formats for easy understanding by semi and neo-literate. Staff members who are overtly sensitive to questioning and criticism are immediately relieved of money handling responsibilities. Constantly bearing in mind that we are mere intermediaries in the business of handling someone else’s moneys has kept many possible excesses of arrogance as well as deceit in check. The distinction between “spending on ourselves” and “spending on the people” is clear and unambiguous at ADATS.

There can be no denying the fact that a major part of the NGO’s identity is derived from the money it can mobilise. So much so that this has come to be seen as one of the functional divisions of labour in the relationship between us and the Coolies. To pretend otherwise would be self deceptive except perhaps for a few rare development workers who have transgressed their identities to that of true community leaders.

Coolies perceive external money mobilised through NGOs as having a certain “neutrality” which amounts to fairness in the local power play between them and their antagonists. They see it as a resource they can employ in their favour, provided the situation can be rationally explained. While we could endlessly debate this point in certain circles, hardly any development worker has been able to convince the poor as to why and how its employment would be counter productive to their genuine development. Instead many have taken a unilateral decision to protect the people, as it were, from too much of it. They get irrationally upset when their shielding mechanisms do not work. ADATS has instead gone about to suggest, through personal example, a mature and responsible manner of utilising it. This has been a clear political choice with many ramifications, good as well as bad.

### Issues and struggles

Our intervention started with support for issues and struggles, and this has remained a vital part of our work throughout our involvement with the Coolies. This aspect of community or-

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<sup>3</sup> We have always found the purely “ideological” objections to the *size and source of funding* to be riddled with contradictions.

ganisation work is so well understood that there is hardly any need to dwell further. But at the same time it is so vital an aspect to building the unity of the poor that there must be at least a mention of it in a reflective paper of this type.

Coolies were totally forthcoming in declaring what mattered to them the most. They identified issues that concerned them and we supported unreservedly. The manner in which we together reflected on the identification and handling of issues and struggles brought deep learning for both of us. At first the issues tended to rectify long standing petty grievances. Then the Coolies began to stake their claims in a more serious manner. The struggles were against the external oppressor at the local and then regional level.

Getting immersed in the local power play between Ryots and Coolies has not left us unaffected or untouched. When the Coolies got involved in fierce and passionate fighting to redress their grievances, real and perceived, we too were willing to stake it all. We took sides. Many have been the times when we put it all out on the line. The shared pain has felt real and hurting. Having travelled a long road together, we too have felt bitter and triumphant, exuberant and cautious, victorious and cheated.

Yet we do not feel that we have lost our objectivity. Instead we are better equipped to see the Coolie viewpoint and understand the vagaries of the Coolie mind and its thinking. We realise that there are deep and fundamental differences in perception between us. Usually these pertain to whether we should be in the business of coping with situations or changing them.

We know the world around us to be constantly changing. Even when not so evidently, we see it in flux. But perhaps it is too much for the ones who live in it (whether they be the suffering poor or the exploiting rich) to constantly keep this in mind. Difficult enough it is, through a street sense and intuition which we call survival strategy, for them to cope with the flux. To anticipate and prepare for change doesn't seem within the purview of the Coolies' immediate interest.

We, on the other hand, realise that our role is to push the reach of issues into ever widening arenas. Opting for change immediately raises questions as to how to sustain a change which runs against the grain of practised norms. Over a period of time, Coolie issues and struggles gradually shifted from tackling immediate needs to organisational and policy matters. Through a globalisation of the viewpoint, they moved on to adopt an agenda of internal rectification.

Another important contribution has been through our capacity to indulge in self criticism and take a long view of matters. Without our input it is likely that increasing Coolie strength would merely have resulted in a short lived reverse oppression of sorts. Quite apart from this being anathema to concepts of justice, it would also have quickly built the wrath of surrounding Ryots and invited a serious backlash. We believe that it is our contribution to issues and struggles which has been largely responsible for wooing the neutral population into supporting Coolie positions.

### Coolie responses to ADATS' efforts

Coolies deciding to organise themselves into new CSUs are today faced with the same 2 realities which faced their peers in the beginning. A finely honed survival strategy to merely subsist without dignity on the one hand, and a totally new strategy for change being offered by the Coolie Sangha on the other. They know the former to be time tested and as having held them in plausible stead for many generations. They have seen the latter to work with some degree of success in their own and surrounding villages.

The initial attraction for the Coolies could well have been these time frames. While one may have been valid for many generations, it promised no change at all. Instead, in Coolie percep-

tion, it guaranteed an almost certain continuance of the unchanging scenario for another epoch. The other offered a solution which could possibly be attained within a single lifetime. A few try to make both coexist and find the going difficult. The Coolie Sangha demands that they work things out for themselves and stand on their own feet. But this requires them to give up dependent thinking, submissive behaviour and the questionable comfort of complacency which comes from a subservient demeanour. They resolve the dilemma by equating, in their own minds, the development worker with all other oppressors they have always had to deal with. They convince themselves that the motivation of development workers cannot be very different from that of local oppressors. Just that new steps have to be learnt to the rhythm of both tunes. There is a kind of “pretence” at fighting the enemy at our behest. An unavoidable corollary to this is that there is an element of “pretence” in their continued servitude to the local oppressor too. But in their minds they are not even aware of the fact that they are pretending. Not when they have convinced themselves that both are, after all, inimical to their real interests which are immediate and of the moment. One fiercely so and the other more benign.

The vast majority choose to burn old bridges and grab opportunities to try and build new ones. Just as the former lot are not conscious of their masquerade, the latter too are not necessarily more enlightened. It is just that they have decided that the NGO is the more powerful of the 2 contending forces, with more money, up-to-date ideas, wider reach and a far more liberal outlook which they sometimes find to be quaint, even if a little unrealistic.

#### (An aside...)

In either case, it would be self deceptive to believe that NGO work, during the intervention cycle, destroys the feudal mind set. It does not. It merely replaces one form with another. In a very unknowing way most sincere and well meaning development workers are forced, by their clientele, to play the very rote-roles which they, at a conscious plane, abhor and are committed to root out in wider society.

This sub-conscious and totally unintended tactic of fighting fire with fire is what leads to all those frustrations and pangs of introspection which continually nag the development worker. They bring to fore the most vital of all questions, “Is it all going to last?”.

A debilitating consequence is that Coolie strength is constantly underrated by the outside world. It certainly is not true that the NGO is overtly responsible for socio-political gains achieved through Coolie struggle. But popular perception maintains that this is so and this erodes Coolie self confidence.

Now let us continue with our examination of how the Coolies respond to the intervention cycle.

#### Coolie responses to ADATS' efforts (continued)

The 2 types of Coolie responses to our efforts coexist in most villages and their proponents should not be seen as adversaries. Hardly any village CSU can be dubbed as one or the other. When all the Coolies in a village are opportunists and treat the model in a superficial manner, this surfaces very early on and they drop out. Consequently the bulk of drop outs are in the 1st 3 year Formation phase. But neither has any CSU gone on from strength to strength. Village units of the Coolie Sangha have to be viewed as the product of contradictory pulls between the believe-it-all whole hoggers and the more cautious doubters.

In the early stages of the intervention cycle these contradictory pulls surface in the form of banal disputes between the good, the bad and the ugly. But they never quite become pious

struggles between good and evil. Perhaps because neither group is quite convinced of the reasoning behind their respective position.

Sometimes this frustrates development workers who seem to forget that, after all, both the referral groups are poor people, small and poor peasants, landed and landless agricultural labourers, those who do not employ wage labour. Social contact between both groups, whether it be in together tilling the same lands, or belonging to the same work gang which goes scrounging for labour in neighbouring market centres, or even in arranging marriages between their children, continues. We are inclined to interpret these social contacts as somewhat non serious and many of us sulk at the nonchalant attitude with which such a seriously thought out development strategy is received.

When thus moping, we often fail to see a gradual transformation with the duel taking another form. It alters into a living debate between 2 lifestyles (once again there are undertones of the feudal mind set surfacing, sometimes through familial references, but we should not allow this to distract us from what is really happening). At this far more mature and advanced point in the intervention cycle, it is the latter group of more convinced Coolies who actually take the socio-political agenda forward. We are relegated to the role of supporting their efforts to achieve sustainability through the setting up of efficient delivery systems and making tangible achievements.

Coolies never forget that their strength lies in numbers. They shy from taking purist stands if this adversely affects their numeric strength. We on the other hand are endowed with the tactic of pitting our convictions against the rest. Both these tactical ploys have their merits (we call ours strategic principles). Experience has shown that one cannot subsume the other. To pretend to be comfortable with the pace of events and at temporary adjustments would be a sham for us. To plough ahead regardless would be folly for the Coolies.

### Stragglers

There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule of thumb. In some CSUs the contradictions between the genuinely attracted and opportunists are sharp and mutual relations unsparing. This happens in villages with long and bitter histories of struggle between Coolies and Ryots, and where a sizable section of the Coolies do not immediately join the CSUs. In such villages the stakes are clear. Joining the Coolie Sangha has possible advantages for the till then under-privileged who never got anything at all from the prevailing pecking order. On the other hand, it has very definite and tangible disadvantages for the ones who had obsequiously sided with the rich and managed to get crumbs, even if pittance.

Some from the latter group of poor people hesitantly join, well after the initial battles to build the CSU (Formation efforts) are over. They are never allowed to share the same status with the older "original" membership. But often times it is these stragglers who utilise the economic benefits given out by ADATS in the 2nd 3 year phase of our intervention in a better way. By this time we are seriously entrenched in the business of making the earlier phase of unity and struggle work with the attainment of tangible socioeconomic results and these stragglers, who had carefully calculated the economic risk before venturing to join the Coolie Sangha, have a better mind to actualise on economic opportunities. Development workers, by then immersed in a chase after concrete targets and achievements, therefore tend to side with these later entrants. This simply aggravates the mistrust between the 2 groups, with the NGO never quite being openly blamed but...

### Older members dropping out

In the 3rd and final 3 year Consolidation phase of our intervention this problem takes a tragic turn with large chunks of the membership in a handful of otherwise mature villages refusing



to pay the Sangha Tax, refusing to repay their CCF instalments, and deliberately allowing their CSUs to wither away in the post-intervention stage.

These older Coolies mumble as to whether the targets we push onto the Coolie Sangha, even with the best of intentions and supported by impeccable arguments, are perhaps not too speedy and ambitious. They question the wisdom of our seeming to steer the Coolie Sangha away from socio-political direction (the slogan to put politics in the back seat). They are, at the same time, confused to see equally old CSUs and “original” members from other villages succeeding in similar attempts to “Become Rich in 3 Years!”.

What they are unable to understand is that it not as though the Coolie Sangha is incapable of setting lofty targets and reach higher. It is just that the very particular socio-political history of CSU building in their villages has created a peculiar problem of stragglers which needs to be seriously addressed. Perhaps a deeper re-reading of our paper on the non economic objectives of economic projects would help.

### Supporting entrepreneurship

In the 3rd 3 year Consolidation phase the Coolie Sangha increasingly began to include economic matters into their agenda. This is a development which has to be very carefully understood now at the time of NGO withdrawal.

When the Coolies coined a slogan like “Become Rich in 3 Years!” they were not responding in the manner of a typical NGO propped up beneficiary organisation. They were not projecting the implementation requirements of projects and programmes of development workers. They made this explicit when they came up with their “9 Steps to Become Rich”, a composite self-prescription for a particular way of life which alone could result in economic emancipation.

It is imperative to understand their taking up of an economic agenda as vastly different from our implementing economic projects. The former have lofty goals and a reach which encompasses all aspects of economic activity. The latter have relatively humbler goals and touch only those zoned down and artificially segregated areas like the rearing of milch animals and tilling of a few acres, or at most the tackling of sectoral maladies like hygiene, malnutrition and bad housing.

Unless the Coolie Sangha had genuinely penetrated into all and every area of Coolie living, until they genuinely occupied a place and position which mattered in village and regional society, they could not have dared raise slogans of the sort that they did in 1992. NGO intervention was a kind of precursor, a back stage preparation for this kind of reaching high.

The most serious of these precursor tasks that we performed was the setting up of the village CCFs. The nature of CCFs ensured that ADATS never got involved in the business of implementing traditional NGO type of economic projects and programmes. While a whole lot of Coolies borrowed to rear sheep, for example, we never claimed to implement a sheep rearing programme. We merely set up a congenial and specially adapted structure which could be utilised by each group of village Coolies in manners and extent that they felt they could cope with. An equally important contribution of ours was in quantum terms. The fact that CCF capitals were increased to serious levels ensured that the exercise was taken up with the solemnity it deserved.

While we made extensive investments to professionalize the CCFs with good and quantitative data which lent to making quick assessments and taking responsible management decisions, we refused to institutionalise the CCFs into self serving and stand alone entities. While we were prepared to learn techniques and methodologies from the banking world, we never attempted to introduce banking principles in the CCFs. We were never swayed by the rather

one sided arguments in favour of a narrow and technical definition of feasibility and viability. Instead the CCFs were deliberately kept as *instruments* for Coolie development which individual CSUs could use as per their inclination, aspirations and self-assessment of strength and potential.

## DEVELOPMENT WORKERS AND THE CREATIVE MINORITY

We shall now go on to see exactly which group of Coolies take the mantle of organisational sustainability upon themselves and strive to make the Coolie Sangha a lasting reality. It must be understood that this group of Coolies, whose emergence and contribution we are going to describe at some length, exists throughout the taluk, in the functioning CSUs as well in the recently dropped out ones. They belong to all castes and comprise women as well as men, in equal numbers.

A small section of the Coolies, a creative minority as it were, join the development workers in their envisioning of a sustainable future. It is of crucial importance at this stage to describe this creative minority in greater detail.

### Development workers as members of the critical intelligentsia

Before we go on to describe this creative minority it is important to briefly look into the class character of the development worker herself. We have, in the 1st paper on the Coolie Sangha Model of Development, said that the development worker is a member of the critical intelligentsia, an advanced section of society, capable of critically looking into its working. She is thrown up by the very same inequities and injustices which prevail in capitalist society, and tolerated by it to find avenues by which some of its excesses can be moderated.

Over the years development work has grown into a sector, mainly due to co-option by capitalist society (chiefly through conscious State policy, multilateral fora and bilateral funding) which saw in it the seed for a welfare delivery mechanism. So much so that NGOs are now considered the epitome of private enterprise and their unbridled functioning the ultimate touchstone to determine whether a society is truly free! This has led to both proliferation as well as so called professionalism. Many players have joined the field as it invited an array of workers with different motivations and varied class backgrounds.

But we still have every reason to hold on to our original conceptualisation of the development worker as the only one capable of stretching her societal mandate and assisting in fundamental structural change. We also assert that the empowerment model is totally alien to other forms of co-opted NGO work in spite of all their claims, assertions and polished presentation. The capacity to empower is the exclusive prerogative of the sincere, the feeling and the intellectually motivated.

### Emergence of a creative minority

The very nature of our involvement demanded a deep understanding. Very many of us had the humility and an element of gratitude to the poor for allowing us to delve so deep into the privacy of their lives. We became empathic in temperament and got immersed in real life situations of the impoverished. The very real class differences which separated us from the poor (in real terms of standard of living and security; as to who has it all and who doesn't; and who stands to lose everything and who doesn't) got murky and confused.

A section of the Coolies got personally attracted and made the effort to try and understand our point of view. A genuine mutuality developed between us and they became our closest friends. Their experiential understanding of the situation got merged with our shades of concern. They gradually developed into a selfless and dedicated minority with a sincere desire to explore possibilities for their people to develop holistically. In a word, they became a creative

minority and combined with us who had undergone a transformation to become real agents of change.

### The partnership

Together we could achieve things that alone we had not seriously dared to contemplate. The quality of slogans vastly improved with their capturing moods and aspirations for which we on our own could only give superficial expression. The agenda became serious and intense. Targets became lofty and the reach higher. Simultaneously we learnt that there weren't any straight and narrow paths. That solutions did not present themselves in black and white, that shades mattered.

Over the years, this creative minority in Bagepalli taluk got transformed into a cadre. This happened in the last 3 year phase of Coolie Sangha Consolidation, after the more artificially propped up group of ADATS paid VLWs was withdrawn at the end of a 6 year contract to build CSUs in their native villages. In the democratic setup of the Coolie Sangha, many from this creative minority were elected as CSU Representatives, Cluster Secretaries and Taluk Secretary.<sup>4</sup> In recent documents they have come to be referred to as elected senior functionaries of the Coolie Sangha.

At the same time care was taken to ensure that the Coolie Sangha did not develop into a cadre based organisation but remained a mass organisation, however subtle the differences may have been in day to day functioning. This was done through an insistence on formal meetings with a compulsory quorum, annual elections, the right to recall, rules regarding re-contest, splitting of functions between the functionaries, reservation for women, and a deliberate indoctrination in favour of representation over leadership, even if that was cadre based leadership. Most importantly, we development workers continued to relate and be accessible to normal member families without creating the impression that we and the more advanced section of Coolies had formed some kind of an exclusive group.

### The handing over process

We have already said that at an advanced point in the intervention cycle, it is this group of more convinced Coolies who actually take the socio-political agenda of the Coolie Sangha forward. This means that they begin making policy and directional decisions with ADATS staff implementing them.

Gradually and inevitably there is a role shift and the managerial and implementation skills of this creative minority also begins to develop. Areas get clearly demarcated and soon it is realised that some functions can best be performed by ADATS and some others by the Coolie Sangha alone. Towards the end of our 9 year intervention it is the elected senior functionaries who actually plan, monitor and review all the activities undertaken by the Coolie Sangha. A natural handing over process is well in place.

In the last days of the Consolidation phase, ADATS merely intensifies its facilitating and enabling role. At the same time we concentrate our efforts on helping the Coolies place the results of their activity implementation within larger frameworks. In other words, we teach them new skills with which to evaluate their own performance and learn applicable lessons for the future.

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<sup>4</sup> Very many VLWs also fitted into this category and slowly converted themselves, after a respectable gap, from paid staff to elected functionaries.

### What is withdrawal?

Withdrawal, even if referred to as a definite point in time at the end of the intervention cycle, is actually an *inter alia* process which we first initiate in our minds, then in inter-personal relationships, and finally in our actions *vis-à-vis* the Coolies we work with. It is not, as some people believe, a concrete action which suddenly takes place after a certain number of years.

The fact that staff are withdrawn at various stages of the intervention cycle, that the village units are formalised with recognition, membership and structures from the 4th year onward, that ADATS run activities and funding have definite start and end points, that self financing mechanisms are built into the system, all contribute to this process of NGO withdrawal and the building of an authentically independent People's Organisation.

### Role of Field staff

The ADATS Organogram consciously facilitates the emergence and development of this creative minority. Of the 3 wings which comprise our organisational structure, *Field* is entrusted with the socio-political mandate to build CSUs, guide economic programmes with a participative input, promote social control, and give emphasis to certain thematic concerns like democracy and grassroots planning, gender, environment, the integration of the castes, entrepreneurship, etc.

Field Assistants occupy a senior position in ADATS. They are persons from outside the caste-class conglomeration which characterises village society and have responsibilities for large chunks of CSUs, sometimes for an entire taluk. Field Workers, on the other hand, are local Coolie youth who have first worked as Teachers and VLWs in their native villages and then as Community Workers. They are responsible for groups of about 30 CSUs.

The relationship between Field Assistants and Field Workers is far more than a hierarchical line of control and reporting. The former are members of the critical intelligentsia and introduce an input which is as special as rare in a development strategy for the rural poor who are cut off from mainstream concerns of the development debate. The latter are persons from the benefiting communities. Together they pull off an admirable balancing act between 2 interpretations, 2 objectives and 2 strategies; between real and felt needs, if you will. This, after all, is exactly how the relationship between development workers and the creative minority of Coolie leadership develops.

Except that some questions immediately come to mind. It is by now an acknowledged fact that when there is an overlap of identities between NGO staff and People's Organisation functionaries, a whole lot of unpleasant consequences follow. How do we avoid this? How certain can we be that the intermediary staff are not just rolling popular clichés off their smooth tongues in order to safeguard their jobs and earn a recognition for career advancement? Will not the "staff leadership" subtly manipulate and prevent the emergence of a "Coolie leadership"? Quite honestly, we cannot have a foolproof system to avert this danger. We are not very sure. And they may just do that. We walk a delicate tight rope in this regard and many of our personnel management tasks are shadowed with such concerns. When the stakes are so high in terms of an institutional power block with large investments being built in favour of the poor, it would be folly to not be cautious.

Later in this paper we will be arguing that the development worker should always remain within the discipline and control of the NGO; that our relationship with the Coolies should be formal and well defined. This task certainly becomes all the more difficult when 80% of the NGO staff are current members of the Coolie Sangha.

But again, do we have black and white choices before us? Could we have built the Coolie Sangha without the zeal of an immersed and totally dedicated staff from the community it-

self? Can we develop a special and particular type of relationship with Coolies in the abstract and not with our staff? Is it bad that the level of awareness and capacities of local village staff rub off on their people through everyday contact and personal example?

## SEEDS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF A 2 ORGANISATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

Contrary to all the recent speculation that NGO leaders will continue to remain well after a so called withdrawal, that constituency bases are being created for politically ambitious development workers through NGO intervention, that newly built dependencies between social workers and beneficiaries will never be broken, and all the rest of the drawing room fears being freely aired, we believe that it is this relationship between development workers and the creative minority which will outlast our intervention cycle. This relationship is what will eventually grow into and define the roles and boundaries between the post-intervention NGO and the independent People's Organisation.

We are quite unable to visualise any development worker being able to enter conventional electoral politics through constituencies created by NGO work. Nor are we really able to picture NGO leaders roaming the countryside with airs of moral superiority, elevated to positions of commanding heights by an admiring population. Especially after the resources at their command run dry. These are all flights of pure fancy which do not deserve a serious reply, specially so in a country with as mature a polity as India.

Instead what we do visualise is that development workers and NGO leaders will begin to act as referral points to the electorally determined democratic leadership thrown up by the Coolie Sangha. We already have a very special relationship with this emerging leadership, and this will continue to grow. We are not feudal lords, whatever some Coolies may mistakenly think us to be in an ephemeral mood. We are the ones who helped establish the systems and procedures of a brand new democratic set up. Who else is better equipped to accompany the Coolies in their task of putting it all to work?

There will be negative consequences we have to guard ourselves against. The traditional intermeshing of class identities and roles is what has, throughout history, led to the creation of leaders and *their* cadre. Ego and power struggles have led to the splitting of social movements and a blunting of their relevance till they quickly died out due to a larger irrelevance.

In our case, we are prescribing an entirely different formula for this intermeshing. One where the leadership of the Coolie Sangha stays with the creative minority that our intervention has thrown up. This leadership is presently in the form of a cadre. It has to grow in its own rights and we must have the wisdom to foster this growth. If we instead try to keep it bridled, as a cadre which merely dances to our dictates, we will sow the seed for the most certain destruction of all that we set out to accomplish.

It is here in this carefully deliberated formulation that we development workers are different from the vanguard of yore. One of the best ways to ensure that this difference between us and them is clearly maintained for all time to come is the 2 Organisations policy where the NGO does not wither away into oblivion like some temporary tactic to create the somehow holier and purer of the two, the People's Organisation. Our identities should always be with the NGO and we should not, in some loose and personal manner, be affiliated to the Coolie Sangha or be any part of it in reality or in popular perception.

## THE LAST DAYS OF THE INTERVENTION CYCLE

The self doubts that visited us in the last days of the intervention strategy were not as severe as they had been during earlier introspections. Perhaps we were all thoroughly spent and had

developed a rather resigned attitude towards whatever was to come. Perhaps “withdrawal” had, by then, become such a *fait accompli* of our own creation that we merely pondered on it.

### Coolie reactions

The few Coolie families who had tried to make both co-exist thought the temporary intervention to be over and worked fervently to mend old bridges and get back into the graces of those they had fallen out with. To their dismay they found that there wasn't anywhere to go back. The peasant economy is no more what it used to be and Ryots cannot afford to cultivate a whole lot of Coolie families for the sake of prestige alone. Indeed the changing times have made it difficult for them to even command large labour forces any longer. Coolie survival strategies of yore no longer work. More often than not this is the heavy price these Coolies have had to pay for turning coat.

Many of them tried their best to pretend that the NGO intervention stage had never existed at all. They became louder and more vocal in denying everything that they had learnt, stating that theirs had been empty utterances to merely grab benefits from ADATS. But to no avail. In their desperation it was way beyond them to comprehend that it was the material preconditions for supporting feudalism which had eroded so drastically in the meantime.

Caught in a limbo, the only thing that lasts for them, like a lingering aftertaste, is private nostalgia shared in a most confidential manner with frightened fellow travellers who have been forced to turn back. We have no doubts whatsoever that it only a matter of time before they return to the folds of their CSUs. The only tragedy would be that they would come back humiliated and shamed. The Coolie Sangha will once again have to make heavy investments to re-cultivate them as it were. Because a defeated people is not the fabric with which a participative mass organisation can be built.

For most member Coolies it was impossible to mend old bridges. Many realised that they could not. Sometimes they consciously chose not to. They refused to make any attempt whatsoever to revert back to the previous relationship with local oppressors. They faced the future with a cheerful confidence comfortable in both their assessment of their own strength as well their certainty that there would be a new and ongoing post-intervention relationship with ADATS.

### Staff reactions

The Bagepalli staff, without a single exception, took withdrawal in their stride. Everybody went about the business of handing over full responsibilities and making themselves redundant in a stoic and staid manner. This in spite of the fact that many personal futures were quite uncertain in terms of continued income and employment. We must hasten to add that this has been our experience for the past 10 years. Never have Community Workers, for example, got ruffled by the fact that their employment is contracted for only 3 years. Similarly when VLWs are withdrawn after their 6 year contract.

Subsequently most of the experienced, trained and motivated staff were offered responsible jobs in the Extension taluks where ADATS continues to expand the Coolie Sangha. Many took these up. Some chose not to, preferring instead to work full time for the Bagepalli taluk unit of the Coolie Sangha. Yet others were tired and opted for non demanding technical jobs at ADATS.

### Mid life crisis in the intervention cycle

Some senior staff in the Extension taluks pondered on happenings in Bagepalli, though their own CSUs were still in the formation and formalisation phases. They got confused when they realised that the 9 year intervention strategy alone had not been enough. That it was not the

schematic panacea it had appeared to be at the start of it all. A fatigue set in and some sincere colleagues questioned the wisdom of repeating the same old set of ideas, once having delivered questionable goods, in brand new regions. They wondered whether they should not try to extend the intervention period in the mistaken belief that we had not done enough, for long enough.

It is interesting to note that we too had gone through this same phase with doubts that plagued us in 1988. It is suggestive of a mid life crisis of sorts in the intervention cycle which now needs to be addressed.

### Democratisation comes in stages

Development workers have to realise the significant societal fact that democratisation comes in 2 or even 3 stages. First is the establishment of democratic systems and procedures. Then are the long and drawn out struggles to preserve these structures through constant use and consistent practice. Only afterwards does democratisation begin to pay off through the active participation of all in the analysing of their own problems and the planning and implementing of grassroots solutions.

All that our intervention strategies did was to establish democratic systems and procedures, even if we termed the exercises to be grassroots, participative, bottom-up and process driven. Now they have to be put to use. This is the stage many of us are at now.

One of the wisest statements we heard from a Coolie was that real development begins only after the formal NGO intervention stage is over. That some actions like raising literacy, increasing wages, improving land, etc. had definite start and end points and could be attained. But some others like instilling consciousness, preserving dignity, caring for the aged, respecting women, educating children, looking after health, maintaining communal harmony and safeguarding hard won unity itself are actions which do not gain a relevance when placed on a time matrix with start and finish points. Development itself belongs to the latter type. It is a timeless struggle which only has a start point and then has to be endlessly taken forward.

### Creation of new identities

A group of people, when provided with space, want to express something that is their very own. Identity gives that space. It would certainly be over dramatic to state that the creation of new spaces takes place only in the last days of the intervention cycle. This is a process which begins much earlier. Its emergence is gradually offered as an alternate to the demeaned status or sometimes even a total lack of identity that the poor suffer as an insult in village society. Perhaps it would be fair to say that it comes to the fore at about the time of withdrawal, when member Coolies have to make hard choices as to what sort of lifestyle they wish to pursue.

Right from the start the Coolie Sangha encouraged the expression of so many suppressed emotions that the poor earlier did not have an opportunity to express. In a semi-feudal environment where even disagreement was discouraged, rage, disappointment and frustration were qualities that the rural poor were just not supposed to possess. Thinking through a situation, expressing an opinion, trying out a suggestion were possibilities that never existed. An environment of debate and reasonable discussion was very often as alien to the poor as to the village as a whole.

After a short while many an archaic social custom, controls and restrictions imposed by institutions like caste and gender divisions began to be questioned. This led to an archetype individualism of a pure variety contributing to basic self respect, dignity and person status. When complemented with economic opportunities, or even the dream of financial possibilities, it burst forth into freedom.

The emergence of this new identity and how it contributes to Coolie self confidence is a study in itself, well outside the scope of this paper. Some attention has already been given to this subject in 2 earlier papers entitled "Furthering the Coolie Sangha Model" and "Coolie Sangha Formalisation". Instead let us take a quick look at what it does.

We have personally witnessed the systematic shattering of deeply held stereotypes about the rural poor. Not all of them, for example, look forward to gratis, subsidies and reservations even when such a principled position seems unrealistic in a failing peasant economy. No, they are not all greedy, waiting to grab whatever they can from the outsider. Quite a few young people do want to marry partners of their choice, irrespective of what caste rules dic-



tate. And most mothers do not mind too much. Parents are not all that protective of their daughters and young girls do want to learn skills, travel, get jobs and live independently. Women do give a more immediate attention to their own health and well being than to that of their husbands. And mothers still hurt when their babies die, in spite of all the infant mortality figures.

New norms have to be created to accommodate all these self opinions and emerging aspirations. And that is exactly what we help the Coolie Sangha to do in the final years of our intervention when they ponder on the kind of lifestyle they want to lead.<sup>5</sup> By no means has a model code of conduct been drawn up. It is more as if the rules are made as they go along, provided they adhere to basic principles that the Coolies have declared their commitment to.

Quite naturally it is not all the Coolies who want to create an alternate culture as it were. Some of them just want to climb the economic ladder and would be quite happy to imitate the village rich. Most of them do not. The creation of this new identity has to be seen as the growing result of all the contradictory pulls and pressures from various sections of the membership with, of course, a more than liberal contribution from our side.

### Building an organisational wherewithal

We have already traced the history of self financing from Sangha Funds to Sangha Tax and mentioned how a village level decentralised corpus of over Rs 7.1 million came to be built by the Coolies themselves. In addition to this Coolie effort, impressive assets have been created by ADATS in the name of the Coolie Sangha. Besides being income generating ventures, these are also value adding in nature. The market value of our investment of about Rs 5.5 million has more than trebled in the past years. To these must be added another Rs 28 million which is the current capital of 638 village CCFs.<sup>6</sup>

3 years back the older CSUs of Bagepalli taluk were about to enter into the 3rd and final Consolidation phase. They were quite worried about their ability to self finance the Coolie Sangha from April 1995 onward for, in their own words, “the next 100 years”. Very many explorations were made and exhaustive discussions undertaken to determine what exactly they needed in the post-intervention stage and how to make the arithmetic of income and expenditure match. By the end of 1994 a mature position was adopted by the Coolie Sangha on financing the future of the independent Coolie Sangha.

They decided that a major reliance would be placed on self financing the village CSUs through Sangha Tax. The interest earnings of Fixed Deposits (organisational savings at the village level) would add to annual collections. Shortfalls to meet cluster and central expenses would temporarily be met by ADATS for the next 3 years till some investments started paying. Our northern partners were requested to help the Coolies themselves implement “blanket programmes” in areas such as health and education in order to build a safety net for member families. They were also invited to contribute whatever they could to building the organisational wherewithal of the independent Coolie Sangha.

Such wherewithal is difficult to describe. A listing of its non material components has to begin with the strength and efficiency of the human resources in terms of membership, func-

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<sup>5</sup> 2½ years back, when the coolies first gave the slogan to “Become Rich in 3 Years!” we referred to these attitudinal changes as the impalpable something needed to promote entrepreneurship. We said that capital, skills and markets alone, without this socio-cultural milieu, would be unable to support the coolies in their desire to enterprise.

<sup>6</sup> An additional Rs 22 million is in the pipeline (sanctioned project budgets to enhance village CCF capitals in 1995-1998)

tionaries, friends, allies and well wishers. It goes on to include the structures, systems, procedures and practices which contribute to a discipline. It also includes such intangibles as identity, self confidence, determination and success rate. The material elements of organisational wherewithal include cash in the bank, assets and infrastructure.

These have to be built up not just to meet physical needs or as a capital which bolsters reserves to make ends meet.<sup>7</sup> Instead wherewithal serves to institutionalise the visibility of the People's Organisation and give it seriousness and effectiveness. This is not only vital for the Coolies to fend for themselves on a day to day or issue to issue basis. Wherewithal contributes to creating permanence through a semblance of permanence. And permanence itself contributes to strength in a way that most other tangible qualities cannot.

Organising people without building a matching wherewithal could result in a movement of sorts. Even social movements last for but a moment in history. They make a loud and startling contribution to temporarily rock the annals, but do not have the structural content to challenge institutionalised forms of oppression and put a stop to a planned and deliberate deterioration of the material and non material conditions of the poor. When built through the social activism of NGOs their impact is very localised, even if more exquisite. They last even less.

An authentic People's Organisation, if at all it is worth the description, will have elements of the movement within it. But the converse is not necessarily so. Responsible social activism, taken up either through a widening out or even a zooming in of an NGO's support to issues and struggles, creates those moments which the Coolies can grab to increase their relative and overall strength in village and regional realities. Provided they have the material and non material wherewithal to actualise on these opportunities.

### The emergence of an economic policy

The basic question as to whether Coolies should only protect their interests as wage earners or if they could themselves enterprise has kept cropping up at different times in different contexts. 11 years back ADATS wrote 2 papers entitled "The political economy of Bagepalli taluk" and "The philosophy of economic projects undertaken by Voluntary Agencies". We knew the peasant economy to be failing and that a pauperisation-polarisation process was taking place. We saw State subsidies to this failing economy increase through public spending (often in the name of anti-poverty programmes) and the awarding of contract works to faltering middle peasants. We concluded that economic projects should be designed merely to support socio-political struggles for self respect, status and bargaining power.

What happened in reality was that these projects quickly began to get a meaning in themselves. It was not as if the non economic objectives were shelved. Far from it. It was virtually impossible to forget these socio-political objectives when their adversaries knew the CCFs to be the easiest targets for anti Coolie Sangha activities. It was just that the Coolies gave the socio-technical aspects of the activities a seriousness of purpose that we had not thought possible in such pauperised communities. Neither did the activities themselves become self serving entities. What happened was that the Coolies developed linkages between the performance of these programmes and all other aspects of the Coolie Sangha. Some protested, asking what on earth was the connection between defaulting on the repayment of a CCF loan and not getting support in a land issue. But the overwhelming majority swamped them with an unequivocal reply. We knew that what we were witnessing was far more than the normal dose

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<sup>7</sup> In fact this is a guarantee which can never quite be put in place in a situation where needs are constantly growing.

of social control needed to make things work. We suspected that a deep craving for economic growth had been unleashed. A powerful aspiration that we could no longer control.

The passion with which Coolies undertook socio-political struggles to capture civic bodies which awarded contract works and thereby influence the overall performance of the cultivation economy betrayed more than a desire to gain prestige. Similarly the intensity behind land struggles left us with no doubt that they had definite visions as to what they would do with their newly acquired patches of soil.

It is safe to presume that the Coolies never thought that an institutional wherewithal capable of permanently projecting their interests could be created through our intervention. Perhaps they felt that the best manner to utilise this propitious occurrence in their lives would be to climb the socioeconomic ladder as quickly as possible. The only concern in their minds would have been to ensure that opportunities were spread evenly and that it should not be only a few fortunate individuals who actualise them. Some of their CCF decisions like the one to give everyone Rs 1,000 per acre "*in order to cultivate as well as the Ryots*" are very revealing.

They were prepared to travel conventional and well worn paths that they knew in order to achieve what they set out to. The search for alternatives was not for them and pondering on holistic viability was totally alien to the Coolie mind. As a result they quickly faced the same problems of drought, the price scissors, market fluctuations and the rest, and reached the same limits that Ryots faced. Just about the time that a serious re-thinking was due on the cards, the political economy of the country took a dramatic turn. 4 years back we and the Coolies had to re-examine our position with regard to a market oriented economic philosophy, the question of subsidies and reservations, and a declared end to pseudo State protection to the rural poor. The Coolies were forced to re-think as to whether going down the Ryot path was necessarily the best and only option for them.

We do not for a moment want to suggest that the Coolies considered innovative alternatives based on community cooperation of the more recent and utopian variety. It is just that they made a break from the fetters of feudal thinking. A difficult exercise got under way to understand the capitalistic logic and explore possibilities that the newly emerging system offered.

The Coolie Sangha declared that individual identity was not the same as the self centeredness of *laissez-faire*. Nor was it merely antithetical to communism's collective. The existence of an individual was recognised to be possible only in community and the relationship between the 2 was understood to be dialectical. The individual was not seen as a fragment of this collective called community, but as a whole and complete person whose identity had to be protected and nurtured by the community. The community was seen as a body which protected individual personal rights to grow, express, ascertain and strive for betterment. In exchange, the community claimed the right to prevent individuals from developing macho traits and encroaching upon other Coolies' personal rights.

Through their mass organisation, the Coolies realised that they had to create this community since none of the existing institutions like caste or joint family could perform the newly required function. They had to actualise spaces and improvise a milieu for themselves. This milieu was as vital as working hard, learning new skills and creating the physical infrastructure of technology, credit, logistics and market. It was a complicated strategy, this plan of theirs to adjust to the larger structural adjustment programme of the government. But the Coolies knew that they were capable of sustaining serious efforts and finding spaces for themselves in the maze of subtle possibilities which capitalism unwittingly opened up for its victims.

For the past 2½ years in the older CSUs of Bagepalli taluk the Coolie Sangha has been actively supporting its members to enterprise. They have been encouraged to borrow more to raise crops, rear animals, trade and set up small businesses. Utilisation has been excellent,

repayment rates at 81.3% are within an acceptable range and the success rate of most ventures has been impressive. Literally thousands of Coolie families have made dramatic improvements in their income and asset levels.

But they have also discovered definite ceilings to the viability of agriculture and off-farm activities. They realise that there is a limit to their own utilisation and risk bearing capacity. They just cannot undertake big enough ventures which create as much wealth and employment as is needed not just for individual families but for the entire community. New explorations are taking place concerning what else needs to be done to invite others to come in and invest.

But a dependence on the coming in of outside capital alone would be unrealistic. It was not as if entrepreneurs were just waiting for the government to lift restrictions before they could come into the countryside and alleviate problems caused by under production through an enlightened self interest. There is hardly any raw material to attract them to these parts and infrastructure is poor. That was when we and the Coolies struck on the idea of projecting the human potential we had together created as something unique that prospective entrepreneurs might want to look at.

We realised that we had created a vast and efficient human infrastructure which was structured and disciplined. Once committed to a set of goals and targets through threadbare discussion and grassroots acceptance, the organised Coolies could hardly be detracted by small obstacles and dubious acts of temporary expediency. We felt that this was all that the region had to offer as a distinction.

But there were drawbacks as well. A lack of education was one and the absence of skills was the other. There was hardly anything the Coolies could do about the former in the short term except perhaps to intensify the CSUs' children's education efforts. But there was a lot that could quickly be done about the latter. This was the rationale behind the skill training programme we undertook 2 years back.

In addition to teaching skills we have also been able to imbibe a "factory culture" in the trainees and their families. They realise that the cycle of capital rotation is much faster in the industrial sector and that along with this vastly increased pace the bourgeoisie expect a whole lot more in terms of natty performance, quick response, liberal outlook, etc. Making preparations to cope with these expectations is as vital as learning skills. More than 150 young Coolies have been trained and placed at well paying factory jobs in Bangalore. We have already earned an excellent reputation in the market and are confident of being able to place thousands more in the coming years. All this would not have been possible if we had gone about it as a mere NGO motivated activity, independent of an emerging economic policy of the Coolie Sangha.

But we have not been so successful in attracting outside entrepreneurs to invest in Bagepalli. Which brings us to the third drawback. Unless and until locally fostered enterprises come up in the region, there will not be sufficient pressure and political will to upgrade the sum of civic services which we refer to as infrastructural development. But for local entrepreneurs to develop they have to go through a period of floundering. Who are these people who will take the risk, how and when? These are matters completely outside the purview of Coolie control. Even after the process starts, it may be a long time before *the* viable enterprise, suitable for particular local entrepreneurs, the region and her people, are identified. Closer to Bangalore the countryside is littered with such failed attempts and defunct enterprises that this search represents.

Perhaps it is only later that enterprises following an Owenite model where a paternalistic entrepreneur collaborates with organised workers will come up. This is a model where the entrepreneur and not the workers take risk and the emphasis is on job security and social con-

cerns. The enterprise has progressive health, education and management policies and makes products for emerging markets where profit margins are better than in traditional markets. This, of course, is the best case scenario. It is equally probable that a frontier mentality develops and enterprises with extremely high rates of exploitation, bad working conditions and worse safety standards emerge with the sole objective of making quick profits. In which case, of course, the Coolie Sangha has to simply continue the struggle. But this would be an all round tragedy and a fantastic opportunity to try out another more productive way of organising matters would be missed.

## THE COURSE OF ACTION BEFORE US

In this, the concluding part of the essay, we will discuss how various players might want to position themselves in the emerging post-intervention scenario *vis-à-vis* the independent People's Organisation. It is not our purpose to make a detailed prediction or prescription of any sort. We only wish to raise the issues and let the course of events determine everything that follows.

### Placing withdrawal in a perspective

Withdrawal is not an end product. It is not a prize being offered at the end of a perfect relationship or a reward for outstanding achievement. It is not the handing over of a perfect system which the Coolies should delicately preserve like rare porcelain. It is merely the next inevitable step in the process of development of a people. So the very first course of action before us is to place withdrawal in a proper perspective. We trust that some of the ideas contained in this essay will contribute towards that exercise.

Seen in this light, a listing of accomplishments is not so important. Nor are current membership and coverage figures. However impressive these may sound, they are bound to fluctuate. The very institutionalisation of an authentic People's Organisation which can handle the ups as well as the downs is a contributing factor to the strength of the poor. It gives identity, enhances bargaining capacity and increases absorption limits. These are vital strengths which may never have existed for the poor throughout history.

### Guarding against individuals

We have extensively described the process through which a creative minority is developed by our intervention. We have said that the relationship between development workers and this creative minority is what gives an added impetus to our work. We have argued that this relationship is what grows into and defines the roles and boundaries between the post-intervention NGO and the independent People's Organisation.

Having presented this as the central theme of this paper, it is vital to distinguish this class-line from individual Coolie leaders and former staff members. Otherwise withdrawal could easily be vulgarised to mean the mere handing/taking over of NGO structures by articulate individuals from the community. There already are quite a few examples of this happening.

Often times individuals capitalise on the origin of their birth to claim a privilege which they otherwise have no qualification to demand. Perhaps this has a questionable validity in a situation where dog eats dog in the free market world of competition. But it has no room whatsoever when the effort is to democratise village society and create structurally guaranteed spaces for the unbridled participation of the poor as essential preconditions for their advancement.

The structures of the Coolie Sangha should never be hijacked by any individual, whosoever she may be. A People's Organisation should not be declared to be such depending on the ori-

gin of the persons who head it. It is the existence of a pluralistic character and decentralised structures that permit the unrestricted participation of its membership (or at minimum the striving towards the establishment of such character, structures and participation) which should determine the existence of an authentically independent People's Organisation.

### The 2 Organisations must continue

Earlier in this paper we have arrived at a carefully deliberated formulation to ensure that the difference between the development worker and the People's Organisation is clearly maintained for all time to come. We have explained that the 2 Organisations policy is not an argument for the temporary role and existence of the NGO. That the post-intervention NGO should coexist along with the independent People's Organisation. That the development worker should always remain within the discipline and control of the NGO she is identified with and our relationship with the Coolies should be formal and well defined. We should not have any loose affiliation to the Coolie Sangha in reality or in popular perception.

Quite apart from being a rather complex formulation, this is also difficult to operationalise. Specially when we consider that it is precisely such a deep and interpersonal relating to each other which has created the Coolie Sangha in the first place. The first set of questions that come up is as to who will determine the formal relationship. We who are more adept in clear articulation and have traditionally been in the position of delivering didactical discourses, or the confused Coolies who have been our captured audiences for all these years? And the second set of questions arise as to how we can go about breaking popular perception. Do we first unilaterally distance ourselves and then explain our aloofness as deliberate and calculated?

The task appears to be absurd from the very start. But we have no option but to go about it in whatever way we can without throwing up our hands in despair. What other choice do we have before us? A continuation of the same relationship which has prevailed all these years, but without the external resources and material inputs which made it possible? Does that not sound equally absurd as impossible? Or shall we simply dismiss the entire question as a charade since, in any case, the NGO would anyhow continue to exist for newer areas and could endlessly extend the same services to the older ones even if in a toned down way?

We don't think so. The drive to convert achievements into lasting accomplishments is far too strong in us. It is perhaps the single greatest obsession of the development worker, indeed of human beings as a whole. We attempt to understand a phenomenon in all its facets, make societal analysis to place our actions within holistic frameworks, and relentlessly persevere with a single minded doggedness all in order to ensure that our efforts are not just transient exercises that merely stir the bottom of the teacup. We development workers have no choice but to somehow become a referral point to the democratically elected leadership of the Coolie Sangha.

Partly because of the obvious reason that the task we took upon ourselves may not be quite finished. We cannot allow a somewhat arbitrary point in time to determine the extent of our contribution. In other words withdrawal still has to be seen through in a responsible manner with unfinished tasks being properly completed. Perhaps these tasks can no longer be directly done by us. But we have a duty to be with the Coolies while they are being identified and carried out.

It has also been argued that generational deficiencies cannot be overcome through a single planned intervention; that we should not make a mockery of deficient skills and abilities; that is what a premature abandoning would amount to. We tend to go along with this argument with the reservation that this should not justify an endless involvement. Management sciences, with all their limitations, have demonstrated good and effective ways to redress these deficiencies in relatively short spans of time.

But there is a far more important reason. We believe that it is the partnership between development workers, as members of the critical intelligentsia, and the Coolies which has resulted in what has been achieved today. A whole lot more has to be attained, but not within this framework that the relationship has existed in all these years. Withdrawal is an attempt to continue the innovative alliance within different parameters that we now have to explore and create.

### A referral point

The Coolie Sangha is an institution made up of individuals who comprise its rank and file as well as those who assume greater responsibilities. This human infrastructure is subject to all the frailty of any group of ordinary people. They are not such a great bunch of guys, this creative minority, that everything said about them has to be composed in the superlative. Neither are we. They are just a bunch of ordinary women and men who have been bit by an extraordinary bug. So are we.

As they go about on their own, many will be the moments when they will feel the need to not be alone. They will face real problems in their work and personal lives; the need to confide and seek guidance will be acute. They will make mistakes and not know, but still wonder; the need to air their doubts will not be feigned. They will get enticed, fight temptation and succumb, but repent; the need for exoneration in order to move on will be desperate. They will alter between excitement and exhilaration, depression and frustration; the need to place everything in perspective will be crucial. They will get frightened and think of giving up; the need for moral support and encouragement will be imperative. They will stick to their guns in a principled fashion and antagonise the rank and file; the need to mediate in a manner which does not compromise will be vital. Who will be around to see the Coolies through in these their everyday moments?

In any properly functioning democracy the leadership changes and comprises of different individuals at different times, reflecting the floating whims and fancies of the electorate. The change they represent is sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. But the fact that they can change is in itself a virtue which make the swings worth living with and living through.

It is universally accepted that the only constant in a democracy are the people themselves.<sup>8</sup> Yet in its practice democracy displays a candour bordering on the conservative and ordains a few with permanence, but not with corollary power. Ironically, they are expected to preserve and protect certain values and principles against the swings and sways of a functioning democracy. Against the excesses of change as it were, and give the people yet another chance to once again alter their choice. This is a paradox which is broadly understood at the level of intuitive practice but often not candidly articulated.<sup>9</sup> It is the mechanism which safeguards an institution and prevents it from voting itself into irreparable damage, irrelevance and ultimate oblivion. It is almost as if democracy is aware that electoral politics, nilly willy, corrupts in a deep and fundamental manner. Yet it has no better instrument to translate the supremacy of the people.

In the case of the Coolie Sangha the question is not so banal as to whether the elected leadership will continue to preserve values, principles and practices evolved over a period of nearly

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<sup>8</sup> The fact that democracies have been dominated by the interests of certain classes have not mattered at all in the annals of history. Attempts to project centrifugal dictatorships as true democracies have miserably failed.

<sup>9</sup> The role of the village elders, school teacher and parish priest are some examples that come to mind.

2 decades. Indeed they will have no choice. The Coolie Sangha is not yet cushioned in the comfort of total acceptance in the normative standards of village society. The leadership knows that any major traversing will simply wipe the institution out. Furthermore, the bottom up participatory processes are strong enough to prevent the leadership from straying too much. It can be safely assumed that the normal afflictions of wider society will not be quite as severe in a People's Organisation which is still nascent and where the novelty of participation has not yet worn out for the membership.

Instead the real question is whether the leadership will be capable of extending the application of painstakingly evolved Coolie value positions to non Coolie Sangha matters -i.e. to other Coolie related issues and also onto wider village society. Of course there is an evident and indisputable gain in so doing. But who will keep reminding them of the fact? Who will keep telling them that the giving up of gender biases makes the family infinitely more liveable and viable? Who will keep cautioning them to have patience when dealing with problems of women? Who will point out to lethargy and distinguish it from genuine fatigue?

Ultimately it is the independent Coolie Sangha's ability to raise probing and difficult questions, their struggling with complex dilemmas which present themselves in every confusing shade of grey, which will lead to subtle changes in functioning. Changes needed to end a boring continuance of the present level of activities and place the People's Organisation on the road to growth and posterity. Who will sit with them to raise and answer these questions?

A referral point is not a focal point even if it sometimes appears that everything rotates around it. It does not comprise of charismatic and domineering persons though they along with their traits are not *per se* excluded from membership.<sup>10</sup> It is not the convoluted creation of a few NGO personalities for the sake of their own perpetuity and self employment. It is a lesser understood facet of democracy which democracy naturally creates as a counter balance.

It functions as a sounding board and standard bearer, a conscience keeper of sorts and a generous service offered by persons willing, indeed eager, to take the trouble to become fellow travellers. It recognises an unfathomed value in emotional relationships which lend to personalised expressions of experiences. It is the next step in the advancement of the relationship between the people and development workers.

So what makes us so great that we dare give ourselves this title? How are we specially equipped to play this role except perhaps through our class background and a resume full of committed involvement? At the end of the day, is it not just that we happen to be around? Perhaps so and maybe not. Quite frankly we do not even pretend to know the answers. But the fact is that we have been inadvertently flung into this position which we have to responsibly consider before either accepting or rejecting.

The only caution that screams out loud is that it would be far too dangerous for anyone to accept such awesome responsibilities in an individual capacity. The fact that our contribution has to be even more personalised than ever before should not lead us to mistakenly believe that an informal association will sustain a continued and contributing relationship with the Coolies. Extra constitutional authorities created through unofficial positions have invariably led to misuse and abuse since they wield power without responsibility. The Coolies would have absolutely no means of controlling us unless we development workers were in turn accountable to a larger intelligentsia. Relating in an individual capacity would have been okay

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<sup>10</sup> Many a time the taking up of an issue or person by a charismatic personality helps personify a single trait which otherwise would have got lost. Such "adoption" results in a well of positive feelings being generated and the problem gets quickly solved. The weight of the personality succeeds in breaking deeply ingrained barriers of prejudiced prejudice.



if the scale of things were small, informal and limited in reach. But not in the case of the Coolie Sangha which already has such a vast and all embracing presence in the lives of Coolie families as well as the region as a whole.

### Our northern partners

This essay has been composed as if there was no substantial role for our northern partners, development workers placed in the north, other than funding the effort. In fact most of our papers have been written as if there was something good going on between us and the Coolies and our funding partners were invited to give a bit of their money along with some encouragement and moral support. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a totally wrong way to have presented the Coolie Sangha building process and it is high time we apologise and correct this callous error.

The Coolie Sangha building effort has been a collaborative one. We dare say that this has been more so than in most other north-south partner relationships. Partly because the innovative nature of ADATS' work, which in many ways has retained a refreshing and ground breaking creativity throughout the past 18 years, has necessitated a huge degree of our northern partners' non-monetary contribution in terms of ideas, suggestions, faith and even plain tolerance. But the more important reason is that we have always been clear that development workers are motivated by the same reasons, share the same concerns, envision similar futures for the poor and are intellectually equipped with almost identical acumen to analyse, reflect and plan joint involvement with the Coolies, irrespective of where they are placed. We have somehow been able to not make too big a deal about cultural differences and variations in the exactness of detailed experiences and perceptions. We have held that these are merely a result of the physical and geographic location of development workers which in turn has led to a practical and functional differentiation in specialisation and responsibilities.

Of late, partnership between NGOs in the south and north is being discussed of as if it were only a preferred relationship, a nice and polite way of organising ourselves for pleasant functioning, but perhaps a little unrealistic. It has become common to state that partnership cannot really exist as long as there is the giving and receiving of moneys, with the givers and receivers having different obligations to fulfil. ADATS has consistently opposed this trend and maintained that partnership is not just a thing of beauty; it is a vital prerequisite for authentic development work. But this has not been reflected in our writings. We now accept the onus for correcting this mistake as urgent and squarely on our shoulders.

We do not intend, through these eloquent words of sentiment, to gloss over very real differences that definitely do exist between development workers placed in the south and north. Nor do we wish to belittle them. Functional expertise has honed our respective skills in different directions. The most important of these is in the field of communications. Just as our northern partners have developed special ways to inform their clientele, we in the south have developed appropriate skills to *involve* the Coolies in the partnership and make it a genuinely tripartite one of exploring. There are throes and pains of the Coolies which have to be recognised. There are Coolie interpretations which have to be understood and reacted to. There is a larger and wider understanding of situations which has to be shared with the Coolies. Only then can any accompanying become meaningful.

The paradigms of Coolie experiences are different and so too are the expressions. Even if physically present they just cannot participate in the rigid agenda filled and time-table bound structures that we set onto ourselves to dialogue. The poor cannot be part of the same fora, as some sort of 3rd persons invited to the discussion, and be expected to participate. Rather than to futilely try and bring them within these structures, totally new fora have to be created. If the interaction is meant to be deep, continuing, creative and holistic these new structures have

to be far more expansive than the coldly academic and transient mood that PRA exercises create. This is what the Coolie Sangha is all about, when taken in its totality.

The possibility for development workers placed in the north to increase their participation in grassroots development efforts is vastly enhanced with NGO withdrawal. This enhancement need not be in the material plane alone, though there is nothing to rule it out. We have already mentioned the request of the independent Coolie Sangha to support blanket programmes that they would implement, as an example. The fear that a People's Organisation would become just another NGO merely by implementing development programmes is not very valid. No such institution of the people can avoid fulfilling an obligation to mobilise and monitor the provision of basic services to its members. Once taken up, such responsibility would extend into the area of supplementation which also involves the direct management of resources. It would, however, be prudent to build in safeguards to ensure that democratic functioning gets precedence over project implementation concerns. This could effect programme choice and size.

But neither does non-material contribution have to be restricted to serving popular clichés like advocacy and lobbying. The sharing of their generic experiences in the capitalist world, helping Coolies to identify current dilemmas and compose new forms of struggle against shifting contractions, bringing global concerns and subtler points into the mainstream agenda, the subjective objectivity of an involved outsider, these are some contributions that our northern partners can better make. The tripartite partnership will be able to evolve new strategies to increase the reach of the Coolie Sangha as well as of all of us.

### State and struggle

We have always maintained that organising Coolies is not *ipso facto* against the interests of the State. Liberal elements in the police and bureaucracy actually welcome an awakening in the rural poor and many others share their view that a bit of shaking up is good for restoring humanity and releasing productive forces in the countryside. Planners see in our work the seed for a cheap and efficient social welfare delivery mechanism. A section of the industrial and management bourgeoisie watch our efforts with insolent curiosity to see if alternate correlations can be forged between employees and employers in place of existing union relationships. Underlying this tolerance which often grows into active support at times of need is, of course, the concern that our efforts should not go too far. Since NGO work has long stopped pretending to attempt at any fundamental restructuring, the State actually encourages our efforts to organise the poor and accepts it as a composite part of a strategy for integrated development.

But the State is not just these class traits present as exemplary prototypes in the highest and most sophisticated realms of the rich. It also comprises local officials and policemen who are entrenched in the power play at a very parochial level. Such entrenchment is through birth and family connections as well as favours and outright corruption. Bourgeois patronage translates into very little when confronting such vested interests at the *firka*, *hobli* and taluk levels. All through the intervention cycle we have been able to use a fine balance between the vastly different strengths of us and the Coolies when dealing with the State. The sheer force in the Coolies' numbers has got reinforced with the lucidity of our logic in favour of justice and doing the right thing. Coolie passion has been carefully cultivated and supported to not give up. Their determined efforts have been given teeth of effectiveness through our contacts and connections. Their lack of material resources has been supplemented with our moneys and infrastructure. An all prevailing ignorance in the lower ranks of the officialdom, festered by greed and prejudice, has been countered with our knowledge of law, procedures and matters pertaining to policy.

In spite of a sincere and largely successful attempt to capacitate the Coolies themselves, it would be a brazen lie to pretend that the NGO did not have anything at all to do with countering the local power play. The vital question that comes up at the time of withdrawal is how the State will perceive the Coolie Sangha in the post-intervention period.

Power equations have certainly changed. The contending forces have the added factor of the independent Coolie Sangha itself. While this will be of advantage when dealing with the State at the local level, it could be received with some alarm at a higher level.

At a higher level, will the same State which welcomed an *NGO propped up beneficiary organisation* receive an independently functioning People's Organisation in the same tolerant light? Or would it consider the Panchayat Raj institutions to be the only grassroots organisation which can claim an exclusive prerogative to democratic functioning? Would the same liberal elements be as open to receiving forcefully presented opinions from the poor themselves as they have been when these were expressed by members of their own class? And at a more local level, would Coolie numbers, passion, determined effort, limited resources and obtained knowledge be enough to perpetuate their strength without the myth of our own being attached to it?

The organisational wherewithal of the independent Coolie Sangha is something the Coolies can bank upon. Also on our continued presence and support, even if in the background. But a large part the preceding questions remain unanswered for the day. New equations will have to emerge through continued struggle and relating to the State.

### The task ahead

For quite some years we have maintained that one of ADATS' post-withdrawal roles would be to articulate what is happening in the independent Coolie Sangha to the outside world, and also interpret wider happenings to the Coolies. During the intervention phase, such 2 way dissemination of information remained an informal and continually ongoing activity through meetings and everyday contacts. While the highly efficient communications system of meetings and reporting will proceed uninterrupted, there will not be any role for us in these fora. There are many areas where the Coolie Sangha has to develop and refine its position. While we cannot list them all in advance, they could include deep and probing sensitive issues like women and religion, generation gaps in the CSUs, or even practical ones like Coolies and the banks. Our input will be valuable to these discussions.

The independent Coolie Sangha in Bagepalli taluk will still have to see through newer villages which want to go through the 3 phases of building. Even if the material and non material resources were handed over to them, they cannot imitate ADATS as though they were an NGO.

Other service NGOs and government agencies would want to capitalise on the vastly increased utilisation and absorption capacity of the organised Coolies, the social control they exert over their membership, and the overall implementation efficiency of the Coolie Sangha. Both parties would want us to participate when negotiating. What will be our *locus standi*?

How and in what capacity will we continue to communicate with and relate to the independent Coolie Sangha? The years ahead have a lot in store to show us.