

0601. Progress Report on Drought Relief Works (Oct 1985)

In 1986, Drought Relief Works were undertaken by ADATS. This was to be the pre-cursor to the DLDP.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. To initiate an exercise where the Coolies of 28 CSUs plan drought relief works to be undertaken by themselves in their respective villages and within their allocated budgets.
2. To implement these Coolies planned works from January to June 1986 so that all 1,043 Member Coolie families get gainful employment for 6 months while they create assets for themselves.
3. To utilise the conceptual planning and implementation skill thus obtained to further the position and strength of the CSUs, Cluster Meets and the Bagepalli. Project cost: 1,043 Member Coolie families x Rs 6 per day x 180 days (January to June 1986) = Rs 11,26,440.

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

Bagepalli taluk of Kolar district, Karnataka, lies just south of Rayalaseema desert belt of southern Andhra Pradesh and is drought prone, the meagre rainfall of 67 cms a year varies even from this mean, is spatial and erratic, resulting in the sown seed often not germinating. a prolonged dry spell in the stand of the crop turns it brittle and crisp, considerably lowering even its fodder value. The Coolies are the worst hit during the drought this does not mean that the *Ryots* are spared. Among them, Coolie women who are the last to get alternate employment, suffer the most along with the elderly Coolies and Coolie children. Migration is a common phenomenon though it has not become a serious solution as yet, since there is no rapidly growing industrial belt nearby, Bangalore being 100 kms away. Also, the industrial development pattern in Bangalore is more technologically intensive rather than labour intensive and the Coolie of Bagepalli, who cannot even sign their own names or count properly are at a disadvantage when trying to join Bangalore's labour force.

Ryots, frustrated with low yields and fluctuating market prices, have resorted to the harmful mono culture cultivation of eucalyptus trees on large tracts of land. This practice very adversely affects the ecological and occupational balance in the taluk. The water table is already low due to a sheet rock formation in the western half of the taluk, sloping in a northern direction towards Andhra Pradesh state. 30 to 50 feet under the surface of the taluk. Rainfall, as we have already said, is low and erratic. Extensive cultivation of eucalyptus aggravates both, the groundwater as well as the rainfall conditions.

It is also noticed that the cultivation of about 3 acres of eucalyptus trees on land previously under food crop effectively displaces one Coolie family since after the initial work of digging trenches, planting and protecting for a year, eucalyptus plantations do not require any further labour input. They need not even be guarded since even goats shun their leaves.

This is not a simple problem that can be countered by education and mass action. Monoculture cultivation of eucalyptus has an economic advantage that cannot be argued away. While *Ryots* have to gamble to raise food crops on their dry lands which cost about Rs 1,000 an acre, the cultivation of eucalyptus trees assures them guaranteed returns of Rs 40,000 to Rs 60,000 after 6 years with very low initial costs and virtually no effort after the first year.

The theory of relative advantage in agriculture and it being unnecessary to have regional food balances, due to the country's well developed and networked communication system seems

to have doomed the fate of perpetual drought prone regions like Bagepalli to the monoculture of eucalyptus and other similar practices. Practices which will make redundant the need for a human population beyond the barest minimum required for maintaining the infrastructure in dry desert belts and such pockets in the country.

Those who propound this theory of optimum and so-called sensible utilisation of land seem to have a flawless argument. But they forget the existence of a marginalized population in these regions. A population, however fatalistic and resigned to the inevitable, due to continuous onslaught of drought and famine, still unwilling to leave such regions simply because there is nowhere to go. They do not have alternate options before them and they do not have the conceptual, managerial, technical, literacy, numeracy and so many other skills that will give them a chance anywhere other than on their native soils which, at least, they understand and somehow exists on. ADATS very clearly recognises its role and responsibilities with these marginalized Coolies. It is to bring them into the mainstream and search for solutions with them. It is not to use macro arguments to give up and desert them. We are very definite that the implementation of drought relief works may not give the Coolies solutions and strength to face the next droughts. But we do believe that in the very least when these works are planned and implemented, the Coolies are going to get a skill and strength that they otherwise cannot obtain.

It is these desperations and feelings of fear and insecurity, unemployment and hunger that articulated themselves in the Coolies' aspirations for drought relief works to be undertaken by ADATS from January to June 1986. ADATS readily agreed, seeing the hidden potential in this project to further strengthen the position of the Coolies and their Sanghas.

When a representative of NOVIB visited our villages on 11th September he too felt that there was a great potential in this project and we asked the Coolies to proceed with the planning of drought relief works by themselves, using the following criteria:

1. The money available to each CSU will be calculated as number of Coolie families x Rs 6 x 180 days.
2. The works undertaken will have to benefit the entire CSU and not individuals.
3. Three-quarters of the expenditure should be used to provide labour for the Coolies while one quarter can be used for capital costs like cement, etc.
4. The works should, in some way, help overcome the effects of drought as far as possible though this cannot be strictly applied at all times. ADATS still insisted on this being a criterion because of the educational value it would have on the Coolies on the futility of searching for micro solutions for their problems.
5. Technical opinions must be sought to test the viability and desirability of these small economic projects.
6. This application must reach NOVIB by the end of October 1985 to enable them to process it in time.

PROJECT PLANNING BY THE COOLIES

The last thing that the Coolies had expected when they approached us for drought relief works was that we would seriously entrust them with planning responsibilities. This was much beyond what they had bargained for and frankly, not at all what they desired. In many CSUs the Coolies could not say what they desired. In many CSUs the Coolies will be at ease if WE decided what works should be undertaken, by whom, where, to whose benefit, how much it would cost, etc.

The maximum participation the Coolies desired was a sort of petitioners' role where they could appeal to our good sense. Even then they would not have minded if their suggestions were not seriously considered.

We were, and still are, adamant that this grassroots planning exercise is followed through to the very end. We consider this part of the project as the most important phase. We are aware that by doing so we are raising expectations in the Coolies and that if, by any chance, we fail to secure support for the drought relief works, we will be placing ourselves on an untenable limb from where we cannot crawl back. We are aware that by doing so we are staking our credibility. Yet, we believe that this planning phase is even more important than the actual implementation of the works and the providing of labour for 1,043 Coolie families for 6 months.

We will report on some of the confusions and learning that have already arisen in the past few weeks of this grassroots planning exercise:

1. The Coolies are unable to conceptually understand the Rs 1,080 (Rs 6 day for 180 days) as a basis for allocation and fixing the budgets for respective CSUs. Instead they see the Rs 1,080 as an individual family's expectation. Some CSUs have actually asked for the amount to please be just distributed to each family and let them do as they please too overcome the drought. This is not strange if understood in the background of the internal squabbles among themselves and their inability to agree upon some collective works in spite of many heated discussions and debates.

Our response had been as follows:

"The Government of India allocates, say, Rs 8 per Indian for defence. Shall we, citizens, ask the Government for our Rs 8 each to buy a sharp knife and a packet of chilli powder to throw into the eyes of the attacking enemy and then stab him? Will that be a comprehensive and effective defence plan for the country? Your suggestion to just distribute the Rs 1,080 is as ridiculous"

This is the very first time that the Coolies are being involved in any serious and large scale planning. We are using every opportunity to educate and impart not just skill but also managerial concepts.

2. The Coolies find it very difficult to contain their budgets and planned works within the allocated amounts. This is something quite alien to them. They are used to seeing the allocations in the past as some sort of dole on the part of the higher ups to whom they could appeal and get more in times of need. Now, this budget allocation constraint is something that they find very difficult to understand and then work within. We intend sticking to our guns on this point so that the Coolies can understand that there is nothing magical in the way that the Government officials, for instance, formulate and implement their plans.
3. The Coolies are confused by our insistence that they must all participate in the identification, planning and estimate making of the works. Coolies have hitherto never been given a say in matters of this sort and are used to considering themselves lucky if they just manage to get a few days wages in any work organised by just about anybody.

If at all there was any element of participation it was the effort of the village contractor to get the work sanctioned in his village so that he could make a profit out of it and the Coolies supporting this effort with their thumb impression on an appealing application.

Now, ADATS insists that in a village with 40 Member Coolie families the plan must have the approval of all 40 Coolies irrespective of whether the work planned will benefit all 40 or only 30 or just 20 Coolie families.

They are quick to label it as unrealistic and impossible. We are equally adamant to continue to insist on unanimity and will not agree to the convenient setting aside of a few Coolies' opinions when they become an inconvenient nuisance.

The actual list of works they undertake in the end, we insist, is unimportant when compared to the process by which these works are identified and planned.

4. This leads on yet another confusion on the right for all to work and earn a little from January to June 1986 versus the right for all to benefit the results of the works. How literally should "all" be interpreted, the Coolies ask.
We refuse to oblige with any sort of answer saying that the definition will have to be derived by them, different definitions for different CSUs and situations.
5. Many Coolies began to wonder whether the taking up of this economic project is not going to threaten the fragile unity that the CSUs have attained. Our answer is that they can either rule out our conditions and say that they do not want the works in their villages, or else go ahead with the faith (our faith) that Coolie participation and grass-roots planning is not going to kill them. The process may be inconvenient and painful, but we are certain that it will not lead to any negative results.
6. 6. Yet another source of confusion is the type of estimate making being insisted upon by ADATS. We reject the conventional piece-work or professional engineering estimates. We insist upon a more humane and Coolie way of doing it.
In a predominantly stone work like paving a street, for instance, we do not want the number of stones needed and then multiply that number by the price per stone slab. Instead, the estimate must reflect who will cut how many stones, charge how much; who will cart it from the quarry to the village and earn how much; who will haul the mud and sand; who will do the digging work and get how much labour; etc. this sort of estimate will allow the Coolies to see if all or nearly all of them will get employment and earn wages. We realise that this is a laborious exercise but believe that participatory planning means making such human break-up viability studies necessary before embarking on the works.

The foregoing 6 points are not a comprehensive list of all the problems, frustrations and confusions that have been stirred up by this grassroots planning exercise that we are insisting on. These are only to demonstrate that Coolie participation is not the anxiously awaited remedy that the poor are waiting for. It is a matter of conviction in us, the intellectual friends of the poor. The poor, in their present alienated state of mind, prefer not to participate. They tend to be satisfied with the little benefits that trickle down to them in the present system.

Coolie participation is never the easy way out for any voluntary agency or social worker. It involves sustained and systematic hard work on the part of the workers, guided by clarity and conviction. In Coolie participation lies the key to a real and lasting solution to the problem of poverty.

This grass-root planning phase of the Drought Relief Works project will continue till the end of December 1985. We are certain that by then a unique and appropriate plan would have emerged for each of the 28 CSUs. We are also certain that the exercise would have by then given all the Coolies sufficient conceptual skills to assist them in implementing the planned works.

CONCEPTS AND SKILL LEARNING

Even in this 3 month planning phase of the Drought Relief Works project many issues are coming up giving scope for discussions and reflections. Since we do not consider the works

as a set of physical targets to accomplish, ADATS is able to further debate among the Coolies on these issues, depending on their capacity to understand their environment.

We will give below a few of these issues as typical illustrations:

- Will these works, the Coolies wonder, provide more than a temporary and passing succour? Will any work carried out really give the Coolies an added strength to deal with the next year's drought? In the context of these questions, how relevant is it for ADATS to emphasise, as one of the criteria, that only agricultural works be undertaken?
- While agreeing with the Coolies that Coolie efforts at a micro-level are not going to solve problems, ADATS also points out that in addition to structural causes of poverty there are also technical causes. To struggle against the structural causes, for example, increased or added income levels are surely going to be a great boon for the Coolies. And traditional knowledge is not enough to overcome these technical causes. It has already been proved for example, that even scanty rainfall can ensure better crops for the poor on their dry lands with proper contour bunds and cross ploughing. These technical solutions must be introduced into the drought relief works, we insist.
- In many CSUs where the Coolies own very little and scattered holdings they see community asset creation like the construction of a community hall, flagging of a street, providing proper sanitation measures like drainage, etc as priorities.

ADATS agrees and recognises the value of asset creation, but we try to steer these assets into directions that will benefit Coolie women, like smokeless Chullas, community bathrooms for women, etc.

- In Aachepalli (HC) CSU 60 Member Coolie families were exploring the possibility of a minor irrigation project where their small patches of rocky land on 2 hill slopes could be irrigated by a few bore wells sunk in the valley.

Technical advice on this project will include a detailed dumpy level survey by a topographer, the advice of an agricultural engineer to lift this water from the valley to the 2 hill tops, and that of a solid conservation expert and hydro-geologist. In addition to this, land records will have to be obtained and scrutinised by a legal expert to ensure that the Coolies have clear title and make sure that no Ryot can later make a claim on the capital enriched lands of the Coolies after the works are implemented.

The Coolies did not have a clue as to how much all this would cost or entail and suggested that Rs 500 should be put aside for project planning costs. When we showed them that these costs were likely to be closer to Rs 5,000 they balked.

This clearly indicates that some concepts like costing are way beyond the Coolies grasp simply because they have never ever been involved in the making of plans and estimates.

ADATS has instructed all its staff involved in the preparation of these plans for the Drought Relief Works to involve the Coolies in these technical details of planning and estimate making. This is the only way that Coolies can obtain adequate conceptual grasp, as different from managerial skills.

The Pauperisation –Polarisation process that is taking place in the taluk is something that the Coolies understand in great detail because of our cadre training and earlier discussions. This causes a lot of worry when planning works that will enrich the assets of the poor. In most of the CSUs where agricultural works are contemplated, the Coolies feel that they will not be able to sustain the onslaught of the greed of the middle peasantry who will immediately move into claim these newly created assets against old and otherwise forgotten debts.

A lot of ways are being formulated to try and overcome this danger. To begin with the Coolies and their Representatives are spending a lot of time and efforts to ensure that the lands in

their possession are really in their title, for this, Taluk Office and Sub Registrar records are being perused, copies being obtained, etc.

In some CSUs the Coolies suggest that the lands being enriched be mortgaged, in token, to the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha so that it becomes legally impossible for them to yield to pressure from their local middle peasants/money lenders. Other CSUs suggest that the plots of land where bore wells, for example, are going to be installed be legally sold to the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha.

The discussion continues as to whether the awareness of the Coolies and their organisational maturity alone can effectively counter this larger and wider trend. The above stated issues gain a very special significance in the light of a particular development that has taken place in Karnataka. From February 1986 the *Mandal Panchayat* system will be introduced in the state. As a result a great deal of fiscal and other powers will be devolved to the grassroots level, to the elected Members of the *Mandals*.

In actual practice, villagers will be in a position to control their own Primary School teachers, village Accountants and a host of other village-level Government employees who were hitherto not under the direct control of or answerable to villagers. This will also mean that financial allocations, etc. will be done at the *Mandal* level for minor developmental works (these *Mandals* will be Clusters of 10-20 villages having a total population of 10,000).

This tremendously progressive step towards true democratisation of rural India will become counter-productive if 2 factors do not change very urgently:

- Firstly, if the villagers continue to be ineffective and fail to grab full powers under this new Act, the Government employees will be quick to establish new practices and customs to circumvent the villagers' powers. To be effective, the villagers need to know not only the political implications of the Act, but also need to have necessary managerial, supervisory and administrative skills in order to effectively exercise these new powers.
- Secondly, this is an Act that can quite as easily turn into a curse as it can be a boon. It can give unprecedented powers and sanctions to an exploiting middle peasant class who will definitely use it against the Coolies. This only points to the urgency with which Coolies have to acquaint themselves with the practical skills required for administration and management.

In our opinion these 2 factors give an urgency to the Drought Relief Works project, and to the particular manner in which we intend planning and implementing it. We have begun sharing this reasoning and urgency with the Coolies who now see the tremendous importance of this particular economic project with a clear non-economic objective.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The actual details as to who would control the works, etc. will be worked out only by the end of December 1985. But there are a few definite comments that we can make at this stage.

Though the emphasis is on planning and on the non-economic objectives of this economic project, we are clear that the works will have to be of technically high standard. This is very important, for otherwise the entire exercise will become an expensive mockery. To ensure this, we have already started obtaining expert advice, and an Extension Worker (DRW) has already been appointed, well in advance, to be involved in the planning and preparation stage from the very beginning.

To ensure that short cuts are not taken and that all the Coolies are involved in the grassroots planning, a Field Worker attends most of the important CSU meetings where the drought relief works are being discussed. This is in addition to the normal visits of the project Director,

Executive Assistant and the Field Assistant where the policy details of the project are discussed threadbare.

Actual concrete decisions in each CSU will be taken and reviewed by the Coolies in daily meetings at the work sites. These work sites will be visited daily by either the executive Assistant, field Worker or the Extension Worker (DRW). The weekly holiday will coincide with the Cluster Meets throughout the 6 month implementation phase. And The monthly Bagepalli Meetings will evaluate progress and lessons learnt.

Book keeping and accounts will be transparent, with village wise and central accounting to enable each and every Coolie understand and know how much was spent, on what, etc. the Coolies will also be aware of total expenses in their Cluster Meets and in BCS Meetings. At the same time, since a lot of money is involved, the Accounts administration assistant and his Desk Worker (Acts) will also play an audit cum checking role throughout the 6 months to ensure that each and every paisa reaches the Coolies. Though a final decision has not been taken on the matters by the Accounts Admn Assistant. Coolies and their Representatives will not, in all probability, handle cash; central paymasters may be used to make payments on the spot, as per the CSUs' instructions.

ADATS will not employ any extra staff for implementing this Drought Relief Works project because of the short duration of the project and also because we wish to involve all our present existing staff in it as a training /learning experience. Even the Extension Worker (DRW) is actually the extension worker (CCF) who will double his duties for 6 months. There are, therefore, no overhead costs.