

0628. 5th Reply to DLDP Queries (10 Jun 1993)

A very didactical letter, welcoming Berry Roelofs of Icco to visit Bagepalli, and explaining the fundamental difference between the European and Indian understanding of matters environment and ecology.

Dear Berry:

Thank you very much for the 3rd and 4th pages of your letter of 4 June which RDT has been so kind as to immediately pass on to us. There is obviously something strangely wrong with either our fax machine or the Bagepalli telephone line since we do not seem to be receiving anything in. We are very happy that you will be with us on Sunday 4th and Monday 5th July 1993.

Please permit us to assure you that the dilemma we are facing in our relationship is only with regard to the watershed approach and the DLDP on which we seem to have different understandings. If there is anything at all in our correspondence which has been personally impolite I would like to unconditionally apologise and reinstate that we value our relationship with you and ICCO far beyond the funding aspect. In this connection I would like to say something which I beg you to not see as negatively didactical.

Many of us deeply and sincerely believe that human beings – unlike birds and beasts which merely adapt to nature – are *per se* anti-environment by virtue of our having the faculty of labour power and the development of tools and technology to use this faculty of ours. We are therefore unable to come to terms with concepts like “environment friendly” (even though we too use the word in common parlance) because we feel that there is no such thing. For us the choice is merely between “environmentally benign” – cancerous, nevertheless – actions and “environmentally harmful” ones. And such choices are very personal ones which come from faith which almost borders on the spiritual. Such a posture, in your part of our world, would lead to radicalism and an outright rejection of all things material, an almost fetish refusal to exercise the faculty of labour and technology. I understand that such radicalism is of late even leading to violent actions ostensibly aimed at protecting the environment.

In this part of the world it leads to a sublime understanding and attitude. This definitely has a lot to do with the uneven development of modern science and technology; what we do not fully understand, we tend to let it be. This is very different from Engel’s assertion that the capacity of nature is *ad infantum*. We only say that the level of human knowledge is not *ad infantum*. It is limited and it is relative – e.g. today’s concerns are about CFC and CO₂ because that is all we know.

As a result, people like us divide our actions between environmentally benign ones which, to the best of our knowledge, harms nature least (since the option to not harm at all does not exist) and others which perceptibly violate nature. This conditions our every decision regarding everything. Then there are those other actions which I can describe only as “clean-up” ones (treating factory effluence and raw sewage, re-forestation, dealing with rubbish mountains, etc.) which rely on labour and technology to offset the harm done by labour and technology.

We honestly did not perceive the DLDP as a clean-up action. We did not have the denuded ecosystem in mind. In that sense it was not the traditional land and water question which we were tackling. It was designed to strengthen the coolies both, economically and socio-politically. And so we went about planning physical interventions which we believed to be environmentally benign. We knew the borderline between benign and malignant to be very thin. So we were cautious and frankly aired these apprehensions. We tried to build in questioning procedures and safety measures (which we called “demonstrations”) whereby a panel

of people whose exclusive concern would be with the environment would have a mandate to accompany the activities from day 1 and outside expertise (fresh knowledge) would continually be involved.

What your letters did, Berry, was to surface these very fundamental differences in perception between us. And so it is possible that we over reacted with a little bit of aghast at what we perceived to be your categorising coolie efforts and the DLDP as anti environmental. We once again apologise for this over reaction.

But your letters did something else, quite positive. It made us start critically reflecting. You have pushed us to realise that ADATS as an organisation and the coolies as individuals do not have a well thought of position on the environment. You have made us realise that irrespective of who is responsible for the denudation, we could still play a vital clean-up role in our village ecosystems. But to our mind this has no immediate connection with the DLDP. Irrespective of whether we implement a DLDP in the 4 extension areas or not, we have a role in raising the environmental consciousness of the coolies and to initiate positive actions which have demonstrative (pedagogic) as well as ecologically beneficial effects. In this sense you have brought positive “environment friendly” actions into our agenda and made what I can only describe as a subtle cultural intervention. We are no more satisfied with merely convincing ourselves that our action choices are environmentally benign.

The coolies’ position with regard to working on the lands of rich farmers remains unchanged. ADATS’ position with regard to the watershed approach stays the same. But we have already started discussing ways and means by which we can go beyond mere environmentally benign actions. Each and every CSU has started discussing what concrete actions can be taken up to benefit themselves and the ecosystem. The lists they are coming up with are all fairly predictable. They include the planting of fuel trees on the borders of their holdings and on waste lands, planting fruit trees around their homes, no CCF loans for those who want to burn brick kilns, struggling against the Mandal Panchayats who see the felling of mature trees on common lands as a convenient source of revenue, preserving naturally growing plant species on their fields even if this interferes with cropping, sticking to multiple cropping as opposed to groundnut monoculture, a total ban on spraying pesticides/insecticides, etc. But we believe that once such discussions start in earnest, a regular and ongoing contact with outside expertise will increase the quality of their action choices.

EVALUATION STUDY

Immediately after receiving your letter, we received a fairly comprehensively worked out draft Terms of Reference from NOVIB. Just about all the points raised in your letter seem to have been included. They have suggested Dr. Vanaja Ramprasad and Dr. Rajasekhar from ISEC to do the study. We have agreed. The other day, at Dr. M.K. Bhat’s office, we had a preliminary meeting and have tentatively fixed the dates for the second half of July. You may have already received the draft ToR from Toon Schampers and hope you agree with it.

The difficulty with including technical experts in the team is the same one which we have earlier raised in our letter of 4 May 1993. Neither is the DLDP being implemented in the extensions, nor has any watershed programme of any consequence been implemented by any agency. So what will the experts do except study the lie of the land, ownership patterns, etc. to recommend if the watershed approach itself is technically viable for the 4 extension areas? Should this not be more in the form of a pre-project advice on the DLDP application rather than be a part of an evaluation of the entire Coolie Sangha building process?

We still feel that the best role for outside expertise would be during the implementation of the DLDP exactly as we have planned it. Our sincere request is that we beg you to not interpret this as being adamant or confrontationalist. Therefore, as a sign of our good faith, we offi-

cially accept the inclusion of experts in the evaluation team if you still feel the need. We will co-operate with such experts to the fullest extent.

We are sure that we will have no difficulties with the objectives, methodology, etc. since we have already had 3 major evaluations and are sure that the style and approach will be the same. Our only concern is that the evaluation should be conducted at the very earliest.

Looking forward to seeing you and with every best wishes, I remain,
yours sincerely,

Ram Esteves