

02. ADATS & POLITICS - M.A.S. Rajan (Jun 1987)

FOREWORD

ActionAid's first involvement with ADATS was around 1980 when a project financed by 357 sponsorships was set up.

At the time of my joining ActionAid in August 1986 there were doubts within the organisation concerning the future relationship with ADATS. Ram Esteves, the project holder, had been made to understand that there was a "lack of political will" within ActionAid to consider sponsorship expansion proposals.

This "lack of political will" was partly due to the overt ideological stance adopted by Ram and partly due to the passion with which he defended this stance. ActionAid staff felt that it would be extremely embarrassing if sponsors came out from UK and found to their astonishment that their money had been used to support a "bolshy" project.

Salil and I spent some time looking at Ram's programmes and were convinced that these were some of the most cost effective investments made by ActionAid in South India. We also felt that regardless of Ram's ideology, he was functioning within the laws of the country. I was personally convinced that any serious development activity had political overtones and that voluntary action is in fact non-party political action. On these premises, we proposed an expansion of 1,350 sponsorships which was sanctioned in January 1987.

At the time of the proposal presentation, we stated that we are getting an experienced retired civil servant to take a look at Bagepalli Coolie Sangha's decision to enter the Mandal Panchayat elections. This report is the outcome of the request made to Mr. M.A.S. Rajan.

Ajit Mani
Field Director

SYNOPSIS

Preamble

ADATS has education in the vanguard of its activities but its focus is on the organisation of Coolies as a class. There is an Old Area and a New Area for its operations.

The political entry

Politics which was at a distance in the beginning, was on ADATS' doorstep with the advent (in 1986) of elections to the Zilla Parishads and the Mandal Panchayats under the new law in Karnataka. ADATS decided to throw its weight behind coolie candidates.

The FCRA

Foreign contributions were placed under surveillance by the new law of 1976. The Act was severely tightened in 1984. The law is particularly hard on foreign contributions for political activity. Even connections at a long distance or down the line come under the regulations. But a chain of linkages has to be established. Details are given.

The interfacial linkage

As CSUs were politically active, will financial support given to them from foreign sources via ADATS be a violation of the law? No, but not because the chain of aid can be treated as broken at the level of ADATS. Various actions taken by ADATS have established interface which looks like a link. Details are given. They have rendered ADATS potential candidate for regulation.

The nature of politics

Politics comes in different styles and kinds and from a variety of origins. Some examples are cited. Grass-roots activists who use people's pressure have to be aware of the variegated forces and make a choice whether or not to mix political affiliations and welfare activities. Also to be taken into account is the attitude of officials to political activity.

The nature of ADATS involvement

ADATS got involved in politics on the spur of the moment, tempted by adulation.

What next ?

The excitement of the elections having passed, ADATS will be back in its stream of organisation work. It could well find itself in politics, due to the exigencies of its work. In that event it has to exercise care and caution. Meanwhile the good work should go on.

ADATS also has to do some basic thinking about long term strategies of economic uplift of the coolies, beyond its present thinking.

THE REPORT

PREAMBLE

This report has been prepared as a response to ActionAid's desire to have an opinion on the political side of ADATS' activities, with comment on the legal aspects. In the course of formulating the report I have had two extended communions with Ram Esteves (RE) and some members of his core staff at Bagepalli, one brief field visit to witness groups of coolies carrying out soil conservation and land improvement works near Bagepalli and several long conversations with Ajit Mani and Salil Shetty. I have also gone through many of the documents given to me by ActionAid. They helped to bring precision into one's understanding of ADATS' activities.

For purposes of this report it is necessary only to mention three background points. ADATS has an old area of operation comprising 23 villages where it has been functioning for about a decade. In this area it ran educational, economic and social welfare programmes and mounted a strong thrust into community organisation based on the "Coolie Sangha model of Development". It has 2 new areas, CEP and GEP, in which programmes and activities patterned on the prototypes of the old area are to be implemented. Operations in CEP which has 56 villages began in September 85. In GEP which has 60 villages they began a year later, but ActionAid has no involvement in this area.

Secondly, all Voluntary Agencies entering the lives of the rural disadvantage need an entry point, thanks to which the rural folk permit "outsiders" typically educated and idealistic young men and women of the urban to live and work amidst themselves. ADATS was no exception. This entry point cynically called at one place in the documentation as "conventional cover activity" was afforded, in the old area by the Children's Education Programme which has grown over the years into a composite of several activities, and in the CEP area with the adult literacy programme. Insinuating itself into the homes of the coolies ADATS rapidly built up a community organisation. It consists of Coolie Sangha Units in the villages (CSUs) and an apex body, the Bagepalli Coolie Sangha (BCS) at the Taluk headquarters town. CSUs have been grouped in clusters of villages for being overseen by ADATS' personnel. Each CSU constitutes a disciplined accumulation of muscle-power (or brawn power, or labour). Coolies are defined as villagers who derive 90% of the family income from wage-labour, regardless of whether they own land or not. (A sample survey says 7% of coolies are landless but the proportion, according to other observers is likely to be closer to 25%). Thus while education of children and adults is the means of entry, the main effort, and the focus of all efforts, is the organisation and welfare of the coolies. Intensive work by ADATS in the old area has given the Coolies tremendous self-awareness and self-assurance, as well as numerous skills for self-organisation including the discipline required for convening, holding and documenting meetings, the skills for joint discussion making and for holding of internal elections. This was no chance occurrence. Consolidating the brawn power of coolies and thereby empowering the coolie class was ADATS' chosen strategy. It is one of the indicators – the most conspicuous one – of the distinct Leftist ideology of ADATS' leadership.

Thirdly, in the (new) CEP area, the initial 12-month period after ADATS' entry witnessed hectic activity and consequent stress. The adult literacy programme was, as already mentioned, the vanguard. Riding piggy-back on it, the CSUs were put together at great speed – 52 of them with an average of about 33 members each. Half-way along, the organizers faced stiff (& sudden) opposition from the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), a national party active in the district. At the same time the coolies faced bitter deprivation caused by a

cruel drought. On top of all this it turned out that the period was also the run-up for elections under the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samities, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayat Act, 1983 (hereafter just Panchayat Act). The elections were held in January 1987. In mid-1986, faced with the daunting tasks on hand and the elections looming ahead the ADATS leadership tried to accelerate the process of CSU organisation through a system of cluster-level public meetings. This built up a great deal of coolie solidarity in the CEP area, but a solidarity which was perhaps transient and illusory because it lacked an underlying base of carefully cultivated, close-knit and well-motivated CSUs at the village level as in the old area.

POLITICAL ENTRY

In the beginning ADATS was not directly concerned with politics. The leadership of ADATS however was not totally unaware of political equations. For example they were conscious that the CSUs of the old area rose up at a time when a political vacuum had been created by the quiescence of the CPM workers at the grass-root level of the area. ADATS as well as its progeny the CSUs and the BCS came face to face with active politics when the elections under the new Panchayat Act were announced in 1986. These elections were significantly and qualitatively different from elections of the previous year, and the elections for the Mandal Panchayats more so than the elections for the Zilla Parishads. People had become conscious that functionaries with wide powers operating at their local level were being elected. Consequently the elections (scheduled for Jan 1987) stirred up enormous aspirations and enthusiasm in the villages. They could not be ignored by community organisers. A choice had to be made whether to take active part in the elections or keep them at arm's length. The choice faced the CSUs primarily and ADATS as well. This, as well as the con-commitant need to partake in election politics, threw up a variety of ideas, debates and strategies which the CSUs had to cope with. The elections also subjected the CSUs to the push and pull of different forces. A full description is given in RE's paper of 7 May '87.

In the result the CSUs decided to take active part in the politics of the elections, under the guidance and material support of the BCS. The political activity covered all aspects – preliminary political education (this was done at the behest of the government), selecting candidates for support whether coolie members or others, putting them up, aligning with candidates of political parties, campaigning for candidates, evolving strategies for election victory – the whole gamut. The participation was at full-steam, not half-hearted or partial.

At this point it would be appropriate to look at the bars and constraints of the law on foreign contributions.

FOREIGN CONTRIBUTIONS (REGULATION) ACT, 1976 (FCRA)

Severe restrictions on acceptance of foreign contributions by various kinds of persons and private organisations were introduced by the Act of 1976. They were made more stringent by the Amendment Act of 1985. The tight provisions of the latter came into play towards the end of 1984 (i.e. earlier than the Act) through an Ordinance. Thus ADATS' entry into the political arena (late 1986) took place when the new restrictions were just a couple of years old. (Incidentally, that step would have been evaluated very differently if the FCRA amendments of 1984/85 were not there).

The FCRA (as amended) comes down heavily on contributions for political ends. Its primary attention is on political activity relating to the Legislature, which means Parliament and the state Legislatures. Some restrictions are also linked to the Central Government's Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968, which again relates to the elections to the Legislature. However, the law has an enabling provision by which the Central Government

can by mere notification treat any other “elective body” as a Legislature [Sec. 2.(1)(f)(vii)]. Candidates for election, political parties & their office bearers are barred from accepting foreign contributions. No one shall accept such contributions on their behalf. More importantly every person is prohibited from passing on money from a foreign source to any person who he knows or believes will deliver it to a political party or candidate. Thus the restrictions are extensive. But as of today elective bodies specified in the Panchayat Act of Karnataka are not a “Legislature”.

The FCRA also deals with what it calls an “organisation of political nature not being a political party” (Sec. 5). The Central Government has no power to name an organisation as being one such, having regard to its activities, or the ideology propagated by it, or its programme, or its association with the activities of a political party. If thus named, by order published in the Gazette, the organisation becomes subject to a permit system. It can receive foreign contributions only after taking prior permission from the Central Government if they plan to accept foreign contributions to be passed on to that organisation.

Thus far ADATS has not been named as an organisation of a political nature not being a political party. But its involvement in the politics pertaining to the elective bodies under the Panchayat Act it would have acquired the potentiality of being so specified because, its activities (in this respect) have a political character and it has (in a political sense) associated itself with the activities of a political party (Janata) as explained later in this report.

One feature of the FCRA’s provisions bears expansion. The 1984 amendments have admittedly enlarged the definition of “foreign contributions” to include payments “down the line” from a foreign donation or contribution. Thus it is not only a donation made by a foreign source and received directly by an end-user of a political nature that will come under the mischief of the Act. It is enough if there is a discernible chain of linkages between the foreign contributor and the political user to invoke the prohibitions and restrictions of the law. Thus if an individual CSU member becomes a “candidate for election” with the support of the CSU, the and the CSU receives financial aid from organisation A which in turn obtains finance for providing that aid from organisation B, and organisation B in turn obtains grants for the purposes of its work (including the provision of the said aid to A) from a foreign contributor, then both A and B will have to conform to the regulations of the Act. It is possible to argue however that before concluding that any payment to a political activist “down the line” has been made from a foreign contribution a complete chain of payments must be established and that can be done only if the nexus at all the individual linkages is explicit and borne out in the accounts.

THE INTERFACIAL LINKAGE

The criterion last-mentioned above, namely the existence of explicit linkages, is of special interest here. Can it be argued that the chain linking the foreign aid agencies and the political activists is broken at the level of ADATS? Organisationally ADATS is separate from the coolie mass organisation BCS, and the independent coolie groups the CSUs. The accounts of ADATS and CSUs will doubtless show that no money was given by ADATS or received by BCS or the CSUs specifically for political activity. But for judging the interaction between ADATS and the Sanghas several other factors/ facts have to be taken into account.

To start with ADATS’ staff gave technical help to coolie members to become candidates for election, by way of assistance in filling forms, taking the candidates to the appropriate authority and so on. During the campaigning for candidates, a certain amount of ADATS man-hours would have been deployed for the political work. At the peak of the election work individual officials of ADATS, enraptured by the prevalent mass enthusiasm, gave personal financial contributions from their salaries to the political campaigning for the coolies. RE would have

liked to see himself as one carrying out political work as a person, a confidante of the coolies, and not as an official of ADATS. But that was not possible. ADATS in the midst of the elections, assumed the role of a representative of the participating coolies (“proxy holder” is the term used by RE). ADATS had a big hand in the making of centralised decisions although the decisions were formally those of the BCS. Similarly ADATS issued instructions to individual CSUs and these were carried out through the instrumentality of decisions taken at cluster meets. Penalties were imposed on errant or corrupt coolie candidates by “suspending” them from CSU membership which meant deprivation of specific benefits by way of education and wages, among other things; the punishment was imposed by a cluster meet on a directive from ADATS.

An illustration will perhaps make this last point clearer. For various reasons the old area CSUs preferred to align themselves with the candidates of the Janata Party for the Zilla Parishad elections. In the new (and bigger) CEP area the CSUs which were admittedly less developed, less mature, and poorer in political perceptions than those of the old area, preferred the Congress (I). For some obscure reason the “central authority”- ostensibly the BCS but with strong involvement of ADATS or at least RE – decided against allowing each area to go its own way and ordained that there shall be a “uniform position and strategy” for all CSUs. Ironically, this central decision itself proved to be a poor one, since there was no awareness of how well or how badly ADATS’ and BCS’ writ will run. It turned out that there was no uniformity of behaviour – while several coolie candidates stood as independents, some stood on the Janata ticket and some aligned themselves with the CPM. No coolie, however, took the Congress (I) ticket but several succumbed to the blandishments of the class enemies of coolies. Would the BCS have taken the strategic decision all on its own? How convincingly can ADATS claim that it had no part in it?

Lastly, ADATS was so deeply involved into politics psychologically that the uneven and unfavourable fate of the coolie candidates in the elections had the same effect on it as if it was a political party!

In short, a posture of aloof non-involvement will not quite fit the profile of what ADATS did as an organisation during election time.

All the same a contention could be raised that what individual officials of ADATS did is their private business and cannot be construed as official action of ADATS; and that central instructions and verbal orders were nothing more than strong advice given to independent bodies. On this basis a technical-legal case could possibly be maintained (by clear advocacy) that a continuous chain does not exist which can link foreign contributions with coolie political activity. It would not be strong; besides it would be only *prima facie* convincing.

Whether the same stand can be sustained if circumstantial and collateral evidence is utilised is doubtful. Whether the technical stand would save ADATS’ foreign contributors from criticism of political “involvement” in the country is a moot question. ADATS could well be seen as supporting organisations which are openly in the political arena, and ADATS financiers would be seen as people not unwilling to support political activism although they claim that their donations are in the field of education, health or social welfare. Given a sufficient level of antagonism such critics (within or outside government) may also be able to utilise the arm of FCRA for imposing curbs on them (ADATS and its foreign supporters), in view of the interfacial linkages pointed out above.

However for the present all this is hypothetical. Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats have not been notified as Legislature and the BCS or ADATS is not named as an organisation of political nature not being a political party. So none of the restrictions of FCRA can be brought into play. The situation however will have to be re-examined if those Panchayats are so notified and BCS or ADATS gets so specified.

THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Several kinds of political forces and concepts come into play in the villages and it is necessary for Voluntary Agencies like ADATS to choose their own path amidst them. Let me cite a selection from among them, very briefly. Voluntary Agencies moving from the bottom up, through community organisation are more than likely to be confronted with organised political parties moving from the top down to organise grass-root cadres. Confrontation may lead to clash and struggle. In politics as in many other fields big fish tend to swallow little fish, and little fish in turn prey upon littler fish, and so it goes on. Voluntary Agencies entering politics have to be ready to face predator pressure wishing to co-opt them out of existence. Voluntary Agencies which have shown high excellence, true integrity and austere dedication in their work acquire a moral status through their excellence; vested interests, landed gentry, traditional power brokers and even the local mafia will find it hard to cow down such institutions. For such institutions, holding the levers of power becomes unimportant. However when they slip from their pedestal of excellence and integrity, their past calibre will be of no avail. It is being said that, just like excellence, sheer total powerlessness can be a source of power – the power of “powerlessness” – if suitably consolidated. Doers of good work acquire influence, and positions of political power become theirs for the asking. Should they accept these positions ? This classic dilemma has been met in diverse ways by different ideologists. Gandhiji, however, had a clear-cut solution. Separate the organisation for politics from the organisation for service and welfare. Politics comes in different colours and shapes. Party politics and consulting with parties for ad-hoc gains are one variety. Promoting people’s pressure for the removal of an injustice (which could be a public good or even a class good) is another, and conceivably that kind of pressure can also be mounted without affiliation with any political party. One method of resisting exploitation is said to be to carry out a programme to build up awareness, organisation, action and reflection (this comes close to ADATS’ Coolie Sangha model), but organisation and action easily lead to politics; but if sufficient care is taken they too can be kept free from the political affiliations (for instance organised coolies would be a substantial vote-bank but it would need a clear-headed desire to keep off politics to retain them as merely an extra-political power centre. Weak vote-banks can be politically exploited, ill-motivated vote-banks can play dirty politics ; and so on).

Finally there is the fact that political power is a heady brew (in fact RE found that even demagogic power is exciting, irresistible stuff !). Leaving aside problems caused by mismatch between what coolies have by way of knowledge, competence and political savvy and what they require when occupying positions of political power, availability of power usually leads to its misuse for selfish ends. Power corrupts, unquestionably. At the minimum, misuse of power would occur for perpetuating oneself in power. Success in gaining access to power achieved by down-trodden groups has also been known to generate the tendency to break away from similarly placed down-trodden groups; successful groups “zealously guard the very gates through which they attained upward mobility from being open to others”. Thus while political success may place in the hands of the Coolie Sanghas the levers of power by which benefits can be secured it also places in their path delusions and pitfalls which require experience to negotiate them without harm.

The official message given to all Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats, for what it is worth, appears to be that they should become aware of the existence of the Voluntary Agencies in the Mandal jurisdiction and that Voluntary Agencies of various stripes and colours will be criss-crossing their paths when they go about doing their rural development and social welfare work. The message also is that Voluntary Agencies as such are not to be treated as inimical but should be regarded as complementary and supplementary to the role of officials.

In my reckoning the emergence of one more political entity, say a party of the coolies will not bother the state level administration. It will also be of no concern to the Zilla-level officialdom. It will not also, in normal times, worry the major political parties in the ZP system; they are likely to view such a new entity as a vote bank for potential future cooption. That is all.

The administration may, when it conflicts with the new entity take a simplistic or knee-jerk type of attitude towards it. For example, one response might be that a group, which is political, even if it be a Voluntary Agency or any other welfare group is no longer a welfare institution. In its political manifestation that institution will be denied or restricted, as if it were a political organisation. And so on.

When the new political entity has begun to acquire levers of power in the elective bodies it will be clearly marked as political. And it must be prepared to behave as a political entity in addition to its normal characteristics.

THE NATURE OF ADATS' INVOLVEMENT

A Voluntary Agency entering politics has to thread its way amidst this matrix of ideas and forces. Did ADATS take this into account while contemplating its entry into election politics in 1986? In the beginning there might have been some cool calculation and calm (but less than mature) deliberation. RE has given a full account of the entire period culminating in the coolies' plunge into politics, aided and overseen by BCS & ADATS. His verbal and written thesis give a candid exposition of the sudden change of tactics which abandoned his earlier abhorrence of capturing power in the mandals. One discerns between the lines that in retrospect RE regrets this volte-face.

RE admits that a large element of hind-sight has gone into his political analysis. He is a very articulate thinker, an engaging conversationalist and a writer with charming felicity of expression. His personality has just the right combination of frank self-esteem, studied flamboyance and smiling self-criticism to make it unusual and attractive. His presentations verbal and written, of the evolution of the coolie movement and of ADATS, and as to what happened before, during and after the elections are full of rationalisations, justifications, conceptualisations and aphorisms. Defoliated of their attractive dialectical cover they reveal ADATS' predicament in the face of the elections. Electioneering beckoned like a temptress and ADATS was tempted. It was a response to adulation. As on a steeple-chase every jump was exhilarating and provided zest for the next, with no thought of the hazards and pitfalls. Elections were a frenzy, a shared adventure with coolie admirers. Thus at the later stages, cool planning and calm calculation flew out of the window.

WHAT NEXT?

What has happened thus far in ADATS should not be regarded as a set-back or disaster. Quite the contrary is true. An exhilarating "educational excursion" into politics which broke the humdrum daily round, a large dose of coolie solidarity albeit superficial, a closer and clearer view of friends and enemies of coolie emancipation, some innovations (e.g. zero-cost electioneering), these are the gains. They are not to be scoffed at. Whatever the reservations about RE's opinions and tactics one fact must be acknowledged. He has fashioned programmes pragmatically according to deeply-held beliefs. They have been purposefully implemented in the grass-roots of the old area. His efforts are benign and carry no evil, even in seed form. No right-thinking person should stop or slow them down. It will be a pity if socially and economically programmes like CEP, CCF, DLDP get stopped or slowed by external forces.

ADATS' should carry on. Doubtless it would already have got back its nose to the grindstone – "routines, disciplines and grinding regularity" – and resumed the pursuit with full vigour of its model of community organisation in which it has abundant faith and experience. Given

RE's pre-possessed adherence to Leftism the model might work less than optimally but that is not an excessive price for his vigorous leadership.

On the political front, let the recent excursion be forgotten, if possible. In all likelihood, though it might not. Empowerment of the poor or altering the present pattern of inequalities is essentially altering the equations of political power. Besides, having been in the field for about 8 years and having intervened creditably in a wide variety of coolie conflicts and quarrels, ADATS has earned respect and so can wield power, power beyond the reach of money power. So ADATS may not be able to swim out of the current politics.

Our advice to ADATS could be this. You are in the water and so swim as hard as possible to keep afloat and reach the shore. Maintain high excellence in work. Let BCS take hold of levers of power in the Mandal Panchayats only if it must. That might be one kind of solution to one kind of challenge (e.g. obstructionist officialdom) which would be akin to other challenges faced (e.g. social exploitation). But the important thing is that politics should not become the primary preoccupation. Let ADATS ensure that BCS tries to do its work without affiliation with any political party. It should be careful about the limitation imposed by the FCRA as explained above. ADATS recent politicking should be built upon. What else is experience but the ability to discriminate between apt and inapt courses of action? Experience should enable ADATS to observe a *Lakshmana Rekha* which tells : thus far, no further.

Above all let ADATS respect the commandment "Thou shalt not get caught".

A word on ADATS' approach to the economic upliftment of the poor in its area will conclude this report. ADATS is still concentrating on wages, coolie under-employment and related issues. But in an arid drought prone taluk like Bagepalli the scope for changes in the wage/employment sphere is limited. For example, any "struggle" for a share (or the whole of!) the consumer surplus in the hands of potential employers (money farmers wanting works to be executed, contractors, etc.) will be circumscribed by the amount of that surplus. One can see that ADATS' ambition is that all coolies in the area should be earning incomes above the poverty line in some foreseeable future. But there is no enunciation of the total economic effects of these changes in the income distribution, especially the effects on those whose deprivation will "finance" the changes (evidently in the face of the "survival strategies" which these groups will doubtless adopt to obviate deprivation). Nor is there any clear vision of the technological base for the large income generation that will be needed. At present economic answers to income problems are provided by experts (in agriculture and animal husbandry) and laboratory prescriptions coming from academia. They are blissfully unaware on third world agriculture or the desirable economic context of development where the poor are involved. Examples that come to mind are the acceptance of dairying with hybrid exotic animals, and the lack of awareness of village level plant breeding kits (for decentralised improvement of seeds without loss of genetic diversity). There must be many more. Some long-range thinking on agro-pastoral issues, and on development strategies for the poor, appropriate specifically for the BCS area seems to be required.