

Changing Minds in Changing Times

**A Review of the Coolie Sangha and Children's Programme
and Recommendations for Future Development**

Murray Culshaw Advisory Services

September 2003

Introduction

This review set out to assess the potential and capability of the Sangha with regard to the Children's Programme. In other words, to view the Coolie Sangha as a client and provide advice on the likely strategies to ensure a strong and healthy Children's Programme in the future.

Objectives

The objectives for mcas¹ were therefore to

1. Understand the self-effort of the Sangha with regard to the Children's Programme and the capacity of the Sangha to enhance the programme.
2. Assess the Children's Programme to understand the potential for it to be supported under the new SCNZ strategy/ VASS criteria.

Methodology

mcas used a two phased approach

The first was a general reconnoitring of the programme to understand the concept of the Coolie Sangha, its ideology and the Children's Programme that is administered under its auspices. In essence this involved a three-step process of **Listen, Observe and Learn**. The mcas team² spent four days in Bagepalli and visited 4 villages (2 in Bagepalli and 2 in Gudibanda Taluk) to study Sangha activities, had conversations with families, women members of the Mahila meeting, Balakendra teachers and the children. Quality time was spent with various members of the Sangha to understand their viewpoints and interpretations in relation to the children's programme.

The second phase involved group discussions with staff and Sangha office bearers from the four taluks (with the exception of Gudibanda). We also had detailed conversations with the core team of Mamatha, Mario and Ram. The above process helped us understand the Sangha's and ADATS perspectives on the strengths and limitations of the Children's Programme and their

¹ Murray Culshaw Advisory Services-mcas is a Bangalore based organisation that provides support in the areas of communications and fundraising. It provides a variety of training and advisory services, conducts research, produces communication material and brings out a small range of related publications.

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² This study was conducted by team mcas: Priya Anand, Head of Research coordinated the study with the assistance of Aysha Ahmed and Babu of Visthar, Bangalore under the overall guidance of Murray Culshaw, Director mcas. The cover page of the report was designed by Ranjini Victor.

opinions on strategies for the future.

Background documentation available from the ADATS website was used to understand the ideology of the Sangha and its past and present activities.

Background on ADATS, the Coolie Sangha and the Children's Programme

ADATS is a secular Non Government Development Organisation (NGDO) working with 30,547 coolie families in the 5 northern taluks of Kolar district, Karnataka, in South India since the late 1970's. ADATS has established the Coolie Sangha (a people's organisation) at the village, cluster and taluk levels to empower the Coolie community.

The Coolie Sangha is a membership based people's organisation comprising of small and poor peasant families who through these groups have succeeded in taking control of their own lives by overcoming poverty and oppression and by establishing a strong political identity.. The Sangha undertakes grassroots planned development activities in the fields of adult literacy, children's education, community and referral health, legal aid and aid distress, dry land development, agriculture, alternate credit, women's programmes, etc.

The ADATS Children's Programme was initially an ActionAid supported child sponsorship programme, which supported 3000 children from 1979 to 1992. After ActionAid withdrew, the programme has been sustained primarily through the self-efforts of the Sangha. The Sangha provides once a year educational scholarships to children in middle and high schools...

Children in fifth to seventh standard receive between Rs 300 to Rs 450

Children in eighth to tenth standards receive Rs 600

... and supplementary education in the form of Balakendras (evening schools) to 14,315 children in 425 villages. Save the Children New Zealand in 1997 was impressed with the efforts of the Sangha to support children's education and decided to support Sangha activities in the 60 villages of the Gudibanda taluk. The support encompasses all the Coolie Sangha programmes with a special emphasis on children. This support was extended to another 57 villages in Southern Bagepalli taluk in the year 2000 thus bringing up SCNZ's total support to 3921 children in 117 villages.

Support by SCNZ ensures a strong Children's Programme in the above mentioned areas. Instead

of providing scholarships children are provided support in kind – notebooks, geometry boxes, uniforms and pays tuition fees where applicable. The Balakendras in SCNZ supported areas as compared to their counterparts in other taluks are stocked with play items, educational charts and even have a mini library of educational books. Regular training (two days a month) is provided to Balakendra teachers to enhance their teaching and creativity skills. ADATS in conjunction with educationalists (from local educational institutions) have developed a core curriculum, which helps Balakendra teachers teach children basic concepts in maths and science in a creative manner. In addition emphasis is placed on sports and extra curricular activities to enhance children's individuality and provide them an opportunity to explore activities in the outside world.

The programme is supported by the ADATS staff who monitor enrollment, retention and dropout levels.

85% of children are enrolled in village schools.

Retention of children under the age of sixteen has been increased to 95%

Proportion of total dropouts readmitted to school exceeds 90%

In addition they also ensure that a basic health programme, which involves annual health check-ups for children and follow up of treatment for children with serious health problems.

The programme (both in SCNZ supported areas and other taluks) ensures that gender, caste and class parity is maintained.

47% of children enrolled in school are girls,

with 61% of those enrolled belonging to Schedule Castes and Tribes.

Special focus is given to girl children to ensure that they are admitted and retained in school till the Xth standard, that they do not dropout from school after puberty and that early marriages are prevented. The caste break-up in schools with positive discrimination in favour of scheduled castes/ tribes reflect the caste break-up in Sangha membership.

mcas Observations on the Sangha and the Children's Programme

Paulo Freire an educator from Brazil developed a theoretical framework of 'voice' i.e. enabling marginalised individuals and groups to speak their own truths, act out their own narratives and represent their own realities. Underlying this framework was the belief that

*' Every human being is a subject who has the potential to act upon and transform his or her world – and in doing so, can move towards new possibilities of a fuller and richer life both at the individual and collective level.'*³

The approach of Paul Freire was one of the original inspirations for ADATS to start the Coolie Sangha. The Sangha through its various programmes and particularly the Children's Programme has helped the coolie community shape a new identity of individuality and empowerment.

It has helped the community examine itself and its surroundings critically, challenge conventional norms and practices, shape their circumstances and ensure a future for themselves and particularly for their children. Most rural communities tend to underestimate the significance of their key role in supporting children's broader learning, language and sense of themselves. However the Children's Programme of the Coolie Sangha focuses more on cognitive and emotional development rather than on conventional skills such as physical skills and social responsibility. This section states our observations on two fronts - with regard to the Sangha and the programme.

"Without the Sangha, there is no hope for the future. We get crop loans, special funds for women and scholarships for our kids"

Subarayappa Coolie Sangha member

"The Sangha has change our lives and that of our children"

Subarayappa, Coolie Sangha Member

" Rapid changes are taking place in the world outside and the children need to be prepared for that"

Staff member, ADATS

³ Through New Eyes; Humanscape August 2003 Pg 5-8

The Coolie Sangha

Rapid Change and Recognition

The Coolie Sanghas were formed (initiated by ADATS) in the late 1970s to combat caste class oppression, misery and deprivation among the coolie community. The Sangha sought to emphasise its position and seek a political identity and solidarity through group terminology and empowerment. Simultaneously they also entered into a development activities by administering grass root based programmes that helped economically empower the community. The community clearly seeks to better their children's life through education and is keen that they are economically empowered. This has to a certain extent been addressed by the Children's Programme, through its schooling programme. However the Sangha is unclear with regard to its long-term goals regarding the Children's Programme. Sangha members are unsure about 'what comes next' with regard to their children. The changing nature of the world brings with it a far broader range of concerns, primarily – how can the Sangha help children of today become successful individuals of tomorrow. The Sangha needs to have a constant finger on the pulse of rapidly changing power structures and social equations to provide not just a better but a realistic future for children.

Change in Profile

The Children's Programme has brought about a change in the profile of the community. While the current generation Sangha members are semi literate and primarily involved in agrarian activities, the future generation of coolie children are educated (atleast upto Xth standard), interested in moving into non agrarian careers and have no hesitation about migrating to cities in search of opportunities. This therefore creates a wide gap between the current members and the new generation, with the children having taken a quantum leap into the future. However the lack of a post-schooling programme could have adverse effects in the children such as frustration and

“We want our children to have a better life than us and education is the only way. There is no future in agriculture”
Venkatramanamma,
Coolie Sangha member

“ We are innocent and don't know much about the outside world. But our children will be different. Studies will give them prapancha gnanam (worldly knowledge) and help them deal successfully with the outside world ”
Subbarayappa Coolie
Sangha member

“

depression or in the long run cause them to move into fundamentalism or extremism.

A 'Relevant' Future

For years, the Coolie Sanghas at the taluk, cluster and village levels have provided avenues for the strengthening of the coolie community and democratic processes. They still continue to do so. But the issues and concerns such as abject poverty and caste oppression that encouraged the emergence of the Sangha are no longer relevant or have been diluted to a great extent by the changing socio economic climate. Although there is no doubt about the Sangha's ability to educate the coolie children, it does not provide opportunities in skill training or career placement that enable these children to use their schooling in an effective manner. A schooling programme that does not take training and career placement into account can only be detrimental to the Children's Programme in the long run.

"Old solutions do not make sense in the current context"
Ram Esteves, ADATS

"How can we decide about what our children should do after Xth standard. They tell us about the courses they want to and we approach the Sangha for help"
Venkataramanappa Coolie Sangha member

Availability of Funding

The presence or lack of external funding is not likely to have much of an impact on the Coolie Sangha and its capability to take forward the Children's Programme. In Gudibanda taluk the programmes were initiated in tandem with Sangha formation and therefore the infusion of funds for programmes were an absolute necessity. The other four taluks already have an established though basic Children's Programme model and the lack of funds may only cause the Sanghas to take forward their programme in a more phased fashion. The Sangha fund which has been built through a steady influx of Sangha taxes and other payments should ensure that the programme could be further enhanced even without external funds. However a stronger focus on components of the programme such as skill training and career guidance would require the availability of separate capital, especially in the initial phases of identifying and placing children in various skill training opportunities.

"The Sangha needs to think about the changing needs of children"
Mamatha, Extension Worker, ADATS

Relationship with ADATS

There is no doubt that the Sangha is dependent on ADATS to spearhead strategies and provide intellectual inputs such as development of core curriculum and provision of educational material for the Balakendras. Indeed in Gudibanda, the success of the programme could be attributed to the high level of intervention by ADATS. ADATS and the Sangha work in tandem to ensure the smooth running of the programme. For example ADATS introduced the policy that all Balakendra teachers must be women. Initially this did create some resentment among male members, but it has played a large role in enhancing the quality of all programmes. The Balakendra teacher participates in the Mahila meetings and serves as a link between the Sangha members and staff and is helping to build female leadership in the villages.

“ADATS foresees changes and is the guiding force that aids the Sangha in the decisions to move on to the next step”
Sudamarao, Staff Member

“ We depend on ADATS to provide our children with training and help find jobs for them”
Anjanamma, single mother, Coolie Sangha member

The Programme

Basic but Powerful

It is highly commendable that the children's programme has been sustained (after the ActionAid withdrawal) primarily through the self-efforts of the Coolie Sangha. Though the effort is a basic one it has been the forerunner for the enhanced model programme in Gudibanda and has succeeded in providing education to thousands of coolie children in the 5 taluks. The children's programme in essence seems to have germinated from the conviction among coolies that they want a better future for their children. Education is seen as an opportunity to secure a stable livelihood and economic security. It is viewed by the community as the single most important means of achieving their goals for their children. A value add to this is that it is viewed as making children more independent and self-reliant, provide them with “worldly knowledge” (*prapancha gnanam*) and “puts them on par with other educated people.”

“ We are very proud of our children. Education helps our children become intelligent, learn to communicate confidently with others and respect elders”
Aadilakshmi, Coolie Sangha member

The Children's Programme provides for a system that retains the child in school till Xth standard and provides adequate support systems to ensure continuity in schooling, deter dropouts and encourage performance. Notable among these are the self financed scholarship schemes and the Balakendras that act as facilitators to comprehensive schooling.

"We get trained once a month for two days. They teach us from this guide. In the evening we learn new games and songs which we can teach the children"

Suma, Balakendra teacher

Balakendras facilitate enhanced learning

The Balakendras provide vital and important support to the conventional government system of schooling. Evening classes at the Balakendra serve dual purposes – on the one hand they provide security and protection, while on the other hand they improve cognitive skills and encourage creativity. The Balakendra teacher is the focal point of all activity in the Balakendra. It is interesting to note that the Sangha (influenced by ADATS) has decided that all Balakendra teachers must be women with a high school qualification. The children are able to better identify with a women educator who is actually advancing her own learning skills while teaching her students. She attends computer camps with high school students and is coached in computer basics along with her students. Her youth and enthusiasm are seen as factors in motivating children. The Balakendra teacher also participates in the Mahila meetings and often sets the agenda for meetings, decisions, issues not just for the Children's Programme, but for other programmes as well.

"We are prepared to send our children anywhere, even to Bangalore, if they can get a good job"

Arunamma, Coolie Sangha member

Education by itself is not enough

The Coolie Sangha through its programme has demonstrated a clear comprehensive approach to childcare and development through its education programme. Providing schooling at different levels with an added concern for health and nutritional development it offers a comprehensive package of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional development for children. The enhanced Education programme in the SCNZ areas has clearly demonstrated that education has a direct

"One of the students approached me and asked me if I should take science or arts. She had got good marks in science, but wanted to opt for arts. I told her that science would be a better option."

Satyanarayana Reddy, Case Worker

bearing on bettering children's lives.

The pass rate for the seventh standard board exam in Gudibanda taluk in 2002 was 100% as opposed to the taluk average of 85%

But the Children's Programme seems to exist in isolation. A holistic programme necessitates the need for a schooling system (conventional or otherwise) supported by a programme that help children find a productive role in the world (whether within their home environment or on the outside). Though schooling and other supplementary activities of the programme equip coolie children academically and provides an opportunity to develop individuality, self assertiveness and creativity in children, it terminates abruptly at the Xth standard level, creating a huge group of children armed with high school diplomas and nowhere to go.

Three to five hundred students graduate from 10th and 12th standards from the five taluks every year

Counselling is nil and children are confused about the choices to be made regarding higher education, courses offered in skill training and career choice. The Sangha provides some financial support to some children to aid them in higher studies (Pre-University courses) but these seem more of a stop-gap measure rather than as a planned programme activity. Identified skill training activities are far and few and are not available across all taluks. Furthermore a proper exercise to identify the various career and skill options available in the area has not been conducted. Therefore any benefits received by the coolie children due to comprehensive schooling is diluted by the lack of post school programmes.

"We do not know which are the skill training centers in the radius of 70-100 kms. We need to identify them"
Staff Member, ADATS

"I want to become a KAS (Karnataka Administrative Services) officer"
Child (12 years),
Gudibanda taluk

" Most children want to take up Government jobs, because they perceive them as safe and secure with a good income". They don't know much about jobs available on the outside"
Staff Member, ADATS

Programme fit between SCNZ strategies and the Children's Programme

The SCNZ strategy is built on four principles - generating demonstrable benefits for children; making lifetime investments; working in participatory partnerships and achieving gender equality. The principle goal of the children's programme is to ensure that 'All coolie children gain ten years of school education'. This has been achieved successfully by the Coolie Sangha and ADATS.

In Gudibanda, the pass rate for VIIth Standard is 98% as compared to the four taluk average of 79% . The pass rate for Xth Standard is 64% as compared to the four taluk average of 50%

"Most people would give an arm and a leg to achieve what ADATS and the Sangha have achieved in the last two decades. Now its a question of deciding where to go from here"
Murray Culshaw,
Director, Murray
Culshaw Advisory
Services

Enrollment and dropout levels have been monitored on a constant basis.

Dropout rate at Gudibanda is 1% compared to the four taluk average rate of 24%

Maintenance of gender and caste parity has resulted in enhancing the status of the girl child and in opening up of opportunities that were previously denied to her.

48% of those enrolled in Gudibanda are girls compared to an average 47% in the four taluk.

"Massive investments have to be made to enhance academics and to enhance thinking, creativity and future choices of these children"
Rem Esteves, ADATS

In addition to providing schooling and delivery of basic health services, it has provided an opportunity for the coolie community (particularly its children) to combat and overcome subjugation, oppression from the upper castes and most important – age old stereotypes that perpetuate subservience, low self esteem and a lack of self-worth. The programme as a subcomponent of a larger umbrella of programmes emphasises that children's well being is

linked to the larger environment of families and the community, the network of interpersonal relationships and the economic, social and political factors that shape everyday life and children's experiences and the beliefs and practices within families. However the programme needs to go beyond basic education and include a post school programme that helps 'provide a secure future for coolie children'.

One of the keys to successful development is the opportunity to work in participatory partnerships. ADATS and the Sangha have succeeded in creating an effective partnership that operates a successful Children's Programme. However children and youth, who are central to the whole process, are not encouraged to play a role in decision making processes.

Implications for Child Rights

The human rights of children and the standards to which all governments must aspire in realising these rights for all children, are most concisely and fully articulated in one international human rights treaty: the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Built on varied legal systems and cultural traditions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a universally agreed set of non-negotiable standards and obligations. It spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere, without discrimination, have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care, education and legal, civil and social services. These standards are benchmarks against which progress can be assessed.⁴

During the course of our study, the primary underlying question was *Whether the goals of the programme for the most part reflect the UN charter of child rights which recognises the right of all children to survival and health and protection and participation and to the full development of their potential?*

Our assessment is guided by a child rights framework based on the UN Convention of Child Rights, which places children at the centre, but recognises that their well being is influenced by factors at many levels – not only by family friends and school. But also the larger forces of culture, politics and economy that influence and define local experience. It also takes into account the core strategy themes of SCNZ – promoting child rights, supporting basic education, investing in better health and the criteria specified under VASS.

“We can veto decisions made in the Sangha, but the Sangha cannot veto decisions taken in the Mahila meetings. Our decisions are final.”
Eashwaramma, Coolie Sangha Member

“The Sangha teaches us that we can achieve anything we want. It gives us a feeling of pride.”
Radhamma, VIIth Standard student

“We don't treat boys and girls any differently – we want our daughter to be educated and get a job.”
Venkataramanappa, Coolie Sangha member

⁴ Conventions on the Right of the Child; www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm

Promoting Child Rights

A rights based approach to education is concerned not only with getting more children to school, but also with providing them with the kind of experience that will foster their overall development. The Children's programme in addition to providing comprehensive schooling and opportunities for learning also looks at a broader range of concerns – aims to influence the contexts in which the children are growing up and is supportive of children's overall development. The children's programme in addition to providing the basic needs for food, healthcare and protection also ensures children the right to interaction, security, stimulation and opportunities for learning. The children's programme attains centrality in Sangha activities **with atleast 60-70%** of the budget being allocated towards it. The Sangha particularly focuses on the issue of gender, caste and class parity.

Gender and Caste-Parity

In many communities, there is a disparity between the way boys and girls are treated and there is a tendency to place a greater reliance on sons over the long term. This results in a very different quality of investment in terms of the opportunities available to them. The Coolie Sangha has sought to eradicate this in various ways.

In general 47% of those enrolled in schools are girls - 50% of those enrolled in primary school, 48% in middle school, 43% in high school. The numbers drop after Xth standard to 36% in Pre-University and Degree courses

Special care is taken to ensure that girl children are retained in school even after they attain puberty and that girls do not get married before they attain the age of eighteen.

Dropout rate in Gudibanda is nil with zero cases of marriage of girls below the age of eighteen

*"I want to be a Balakendra teacher."
Student in Bagepalli Taluk*

*"My husband and in-laws should also do their share of work. I refuse to take on all the responsibility."
Lines narrated by a child actor in a Balakendra play based on the theme of women empowerment.*

*"Kai Bidi" Please drop your hand down.
Balakendra teacher discouraging children from folding their hands (a subservient gesture) when talking to her*

Attendance and dropouts are monitored by the women members of the Sangha who through their Mahila meetings have the vested power to make decisions regarding the children's programme.

Further gender empowerment has been sought through the appointment of women as Balakendra teachers. These teachers serve as role models for school children and therefore are able to bring in a feminine perspective and therefore play a valuable role in making future generations more gender sensitive.

The Sangha has also sought to eradicate caste differences.

61% of the children enrolled in school are from a scheduled caste/ scheduled tribe background – 62% in high school, 64% in middle school, 57% in high school, 47% in Pre-University and 29% in Degree courses

The above statistics is reflected in the membership of the Sangha which is united in terms of poverty and not in terms of caste and class. Schools are the only medium where children from different communities come together and are treated on par with their peers. The Sangha has used the concept of caste parity to help children break free from traditional practices prevalent in the village and adopt practices that promote the concept of a child as a individual.

Supporting Basic Education

The core premise of the Children's Programme is that schooling of children of under-privileged communities allows them to break free from both economic as well as caste and poverty. In addition education helps them to break free from cyclical attitudes such as subservience and lack of dignity that is common to poor scheduled caste families. Children need high quality, relevant opportunities for learning in secure and inclusive environments. Coolie Sangha has

“Coolie children now challenge established practices. They are knowledgeable and liberal. A boy is no more viewed as a boy and a girl as a girl. The Sangha has helped change child rearing practices.”
Ram Exteves ,
ADATS
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“Education has made my son more responsible. We often ask him for advice when we make important decisions.”
Amaravathi, CSU
member

taken it upon itself to provide educational scholarships to all coolie children and also provide supplementary education through the medium of Balakendras. These Balakendras teach basic concepts through creative ways and provide educational material that allow them to explore worlds different from their own. It also takes care to ensure that school dropouts are provided non formal education to allow them to 'catch up' and be integrated into the conventional school system.

"We ensure that children do not miss school because of poor nutrition and ill health"
Ayaz, Case Worker

Investing in Better health

The Sangha (with the help of ADATS) has a basic health programme in place, which provides annual health care to children and follows up on cases with serious ailments and ensures that proper medical care is given. In addition Sangha members (who are part of the school betterment committee) ensure that the children benefit from the mid day meal scheme introduced by the Government. Other health programmes target the family and community as a whole and therefore have an indirect bearing on the child.

"We focus on the community as a whole rather than just on the child"
Staff Member,
ADATS

An Umbrella Approach

The Child Rights Convention emphasises that the family, in all its many forms, is the natural environment for the growth and well being of the children and it recognises the rights and responsibilities of families in the upbringing, development and guidance of their children (preamble, Article 5, 18 of CRC).

The Coolie Sangha has realised that the welfare of the family and the community as a whole, plays a critical part in the achievement of child rights. ADATS and the Coolie Sangha have for decades advocated the concept of a community sponsorship programme as opposed to the child sponsorship programme. The community sponsorship programme while catering to the needs of the community as a whole, understands that the development of the child is the pivot to the whole process and therefore emphasises a child

"I am a single women and the Sangha has given me Rs 12,000 to buy sheep from the Women's Fund.
Eashwaramaa, Single Mother, Coolie Sangha Member
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focus. The positive identity provided by the Sangha and the tangibles provides by micro credit and crop loan programmes have helped the community to better realise their roles in shaping the future of their children. This in turn has to lead to better 'child socialisation' which refers to the change in child rearing practices of the community. The Children's Programme therefore builds on these practices to create alternative opportunities for children.

*“We are what we are because of the Sangha”
Student (15 years) at the computer camp*

Participation and Progress

The Convention asserts children's right to express their opinions freely and to have their opinions taken into account in any matters that affect them. (Article 12, 13, CRC).

Participation has become a very 'fashionable' word in development and can be used in many contexts. Participation does not always have to be limited to active involvement and control.- it can also be a matter of what children are included in and exposed to. The chance to watch and learn from adults rather than being excluded on the basis of age from the activities and concerns of family and community, is an important component of the right to participate. Coolie children are always present in coolie Sangha meetings (younger children generally accompany their mothers to mahila meetings). We also noticed that they were present during several of our meetings with members and families of the community and were also part of a group that attended cluster and village level meetings. Even if they did not have anything to contribute, they were on a daily basis exposed to Sangha 'terminology' and ideology. However on the other hand the right of children to participation is partial in some respects. While children are encouraged to express their opinions freely in the Balakendras and give vent to their creativity, there has been no attempt made by either ADATS or the Sangha to include children in decision making. While there has been a decrease in the average age of the Sangha (across the four taluks), there is not much evidence about the role of schooled youth (new members) in decision

*“In some belts the age of the Coolie Sangha has decreased. People who come for the meetings have become younger”
Ram Esteves, ADATS*

making. Therefore the ability of the Sangha to understand the current economic and social scenario is decreased.

The Children's Programme on the whole appear to be both an expression of and a promise for the advancement of democracy and children's rights. However it needs to enhance its efforts in the areas of child participation. We observed very little of child involvement in decision making and management of the programme, an area of increasing emphasis in progressive programmes today.

mcas Recommendations

Given below are our recommendations on how the self-effort of the Coolie Sangha can be optimised and sustained to enhance the existent Children's Programme and provide new directions to increase its relevancy.

The recommendations have been grouped under three major areas of focus.

1. Enhancing the schooling and education programme

a) Conduct more workshops on Life Skills training and value based education

The core curriculum needs to be enhanced to encompass life skills training and value based education. These encourage children to view the world with multiple perspectives and engage in critical questioning and reform. This is already being done to some extent. For example, children who attend computer classes are taught table manners and have the opportunity to interact with the opposite sex. Workshops on personality development, conversational English, creative thinking etc., could be held as part of summer camps for children.

b) Provide enhanced training to the Balakendra teachers

The Balakendra teacher is perhaps the most important individual in the entire Children's Programme. She acts as a change agent and is the link between the Sangha and her children. Continued emphasis and investment on her education and training is necessary. She could be used as a conduit to introduce valuable concepts such as life skills, value based educational themes. She could gradually be trained to take on the role of an informal counsellor as she is in constant contact with children in the programme and is in the best position to offer them advice on the various options available. As mentioned above she along with other individuals (who have been through the programme) and have returned to the village can take on the roles of role models/ mentors for the new generation. In addition as a valuable member of the Mahila meetings, she is influential in shaping the agenda, decisions, action and priorities in the coolie Sangha at the village level.

c) Introduce more 'English'

There was an opinion among Sangha members and some of the staff that knowledge of English was considered as an essential skill in being able to 'deal more effectively' and 'exist' in the outside world. It was also felt that English 'helped children get a foothold in competitive society'. Several of the Balakendra teachers and the children were able to read English and

understand a few basic phrases, but were not able to converse in English. The core curriculum could include courses on conversational English to allow children a rudimentary knowledge of the language and related aspects of self-confidence, employment and personality development. i.e to enable children to converse in a limited fashion in English and interact and converse with urban youth and adults (who have high levels of self-confidence); and with members of the opposite sex.

d) Build relationships with organisations that can provide specialised inputs in education and schooling

The programme in its current form tends to isolate schooling from other components of education such as skill training and career guidance. It is important that ADATS and the Sangha build relationships with other institutions or NGOs working in the field of education and skill training. Individuals or groups with particular kind of expertise are essential to strengthen these aspects of the programme. Groups such as ADD (Action on Disability and Development India) and Worth Trust could be approached to help with disabled children; NGO's such as Suvidya⁵, Kathalaya⁶ and Sutradhar⁷ based in Bangalore could provide inputs on evolving ideas in education, enhance creativity and learning skills and help with innovative learning media for children.

e) Address children with special needs i.e physically and mentally challenged children.

While the programme adequately addresses the mainstream needs of children, no attempts have been made so far to address the needs of children with special needs such as physically and mentally challenged children. Though these children are in the minority, even unintended neglect can lead to sustained patterns of exclusion. It is essential that attempts be made to integrate these children in the regular school system and identify organisations that could cater to their special needs.

⁵ Suvidya creates models or teaching aids to illustrate mathematical concepts, and promotes and utilises innovative ideas in education.

⁶ Kathalaya educates through innovative storytelling and has specific educational programmes to inspire creativity in children.

⁷ Sutradhar produces and distributes learning media such as toys, science kits and books to schools.

f) Increase focus on Child Rights

It is important to develop a process by which the programme plays a pivotal role in ensuring children's rights and encourages approaches to child rights and child development programming which works at different levels. Though the programme in essence tackles issues such as child labour and security, nevertheless more needs to be done in areas such as child participation i.e. encourage children to play a role with regard to decision making. It is also important that Sangha focus more on gender sensitisation and educate the community about issues such as child labour and abuse. It is also essential that the core curriculum integrate gender-based issues to create increased awareness among Balakendra teachers and their children. In particular there needs to be a better recognition and more flexible response to the capacity of the Sangha to address the changing needs of children. Education and capacity building in the area of child rights is particularly important and the Coolie Sangha needs inputs from organisations like the The Concerned for Working Children,⁸ that focus on child rights.

2. Introducing a Post Schooling Programme

a) Introduce a basic post school programme that provides counselling, skill training and career guidance.

An enhanced schooling programme supported by a strong post schooling programme (Counselling, skill training and career placement) is essential for realising the development goal (All coolie children get a secure future of their choice) of the Children's Programme. Schooling forms the core or the base of the Children' Programme with the value add being provided in the form of skill training, counselling and career guidance. Either of these components in isolation will defeat the development goal of the Sangha.

b) Identify technical coordinators who can help build a programme

Given the urgent need to establish a post schooling programme that focuses on skill training and career counselling, it is essential that this effort not be arbitrary or isolated and restricted only to a few areas and children. It is essential that an entire programme be built around this effort, with inputs from staff or ex-students who are able to identify key training centres and career opportunities in the surrounding regions (50 – 100 kms radius).

⁸ CWC, Bangalore works to eradicate child labour and has helped establish Bhima Sangha, a working children's forum to enable children to identify and share their problems.

c) Identify mentors from ex-students of the programme

Individuals who were products of the Children's Programme in the past, serve as role models and mentors for the emerging generation. According to ADATS several of those who migrated in search of jobs have returned with new skills and capabilities. In addition, they hold wider knowledge of the world, learn to respect different viewpoints and help diffuse new knowledge and new learnings. Along with the Balakendra teachers, they are a potential source of knowledge and act as guides to the outside world. They return with different perceptions and conceptual skills and serve as a vast repository of knowledge on opportunities available in the outside world. In our conversations with staff and Sangha members we were given at least two examples of individuals who had been through the programme and come back to their villages. One had set up a photocopying business and the other was a tailor. They were able to provide limited training and employment to few of the youth.

d) Introduce the concept of youth clubs for children, which provide them a forum to voice their opinions and engage in participatory decision making.

It is being recognised increasingly that there are many advantages to children having a greater voice in their own development and in the development of their communities. It is essential that the Sangha and ADATS encourage the formation of youth clubs as part of the after school programme. These clubs could act as fora for schooled youth to engage in discussions and activities and participate in decision making that impacts their lives . generations. These clubs can also have linkages with Balakendra with youth (along with the Balakendra teacher) helping to shape the agenda and serving as mentors for younger children.

3. Enhancing the effectiveness and relevancy of the Sangha

a) Make the programme more relevant to changing needs

Globalisation has meant vast changes in the world at large and therefore a perceptible difference in the environment into which schooled youth emerge. The Coolie Sangha views education as a primary goal for their children and a means to a better life. But the Sangha needs to assess the relevance of the programme in the light of the 'rapid changes' that are taking place in the outside world. Livelihoods and job opportunities are changing and it is essential that the Sangha realise that still further change is likely for their children. A replication of the Gudibanda programme, while increasing the quality of the schooling

programme is unlikely to create the intended impact. It is essential that an enhancement of the Children's Programme takes into consideration the larger emerging picture and add components such as life skills management and value based education. This will help children deal more effectively with rapidly changing futures with flexibility, curiosity and innovation. The Sanghas need to re-articulate their development goals from time to time. For example the past required the Sangha to focus on political activism. Current times demand the need for a shift with primacy being given to establishing the secure future of children. The Sangha needs to reorient itself and its programme to fit children's needs. The Sangha needs to try and find a fit between children's needs, capabilities and talents and the various career choices available in the surrounding areas (within 50 – 100 kms radius). More important it needs to expose children to a worldview that is realistic and responsive at varying levels through counselling and career guidance.

b) Rejuvenate the Coolie Sangha through change in profile of members

In order to reorient itself and cast the Children's Programme in a new mould, it is essential that there is a change in the decision making processes of the Sangha. This is possible only through the infusion of new blood. While, this at a superficial level, addresses the issue of schooled youth being retained in the coolie society and becoming active members, at a deeper level it looks at the emergence of a new cadre. It is essentially that the new cadre while fully imbibed in the ideology of the Sangha, have the ability to use their schooling and knowledge of the outside world to tap opportunities available both locally and on the outside to help sustain the Sangha and provide secure futures for the next generation.

c) Reversing the migration of individuals

It is important to encourage individuals who have migrated and gone outside the community to be provided incentives to return back and set up economic enterprises. It would help if an investment fund could be set up to provide aid to such individuals.

Finding a fit between the Children's Programme and the SCNZ strategy/ VASS Criteria

In light of the current programme activities and the potential for the programme to be supported under the new SCNZ strategy and VASS criteria, it is of primary importance that SCNZ help strengthen the existing programme and expand the Children's Programme to the other four taluks currently supported through the self effort of the Sanghas. It is also essential that an entire programme be built around post schooling activities, with focus on counselling, skill training and career guidance. The Childrens Programme has to a large extent combatted issues such as child labour. However more emphasis needs to be placed on developing a specific child rights framework in conjunction with ADATS and the Sangha, keeping in mind the needs and concerns of the programme region. Participatory workshops with children, Sangha representatives and ADATS staff need to be integrated into this framework. Capacity building and training of Sangha members to increase their knowledge and confidence in their abilities to support their children's development and ensure their rights also needs to be addressed. Please refer to Annexure 1 for a framework which summarises the current fit between SCNZ strategies and the Children's Programme and the potential for further enhancement of the programme.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the present Children's Programme in both Gudibanda and the other taluks has been remarkably successful in getting coolie children (boys and girls) into school. But, there is a But! This is the big question which plagues not just the Coolie Sangha and the Children's Programme but also other educational programmes in other parts of India and indeed the world. The transition from a student to being a productive individual in the community is not easy and enabling this is a challenge to any organisation in the field of education. ADATS and the Sangha framework provides a fascinating opportunity to examine the 'transition' phase with fresh energy and insights. Even partial success in this venture would add real value and meaning to the future of the coolie community. Such an initiative is therefore well worth supporting as it would add substantial value to the lives of Coolie children and the Coolie Sangha. The experience could be of real value to the wider development community faced with this 'transition' in so many societies.

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We conclude by suggesting that the present proposal to SCNZ be revised in the light of the recommendations given above. Perhaps modifications or a change in emphasis to take the above points into account would enable the children's programme to more effectively serve the needs of the children and the aspirations of the Sangha.

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Annexure 1

Fit between SCNZ strategy and the ADATS/ Coolie Sangha Children's Programme

<i>SCNZ Principles</i>	<i>Current areas of fit between of SCNZ principles and the children's programmes</i>	<i>Potential areas of fit between SCNZ strategy and children's programme/ Need Gaps</i>
Demonstrable benefits for children	<p>Comprehensive schooling programme that ensures that all coolie children gain 10 years of education</p> <p>Equips coolie children academically and provides an opportunity to develop individuality, self assertiveness and creativity in children</p> <p>Maintains parity in terms of gender and caste</p> <p>Uses a child rights based approach and tackles issues such as child labour</p> <p>New child socialization practices and child practices adopted by the coolie community</p> <p>Health concerns of children addressed through annual Health check ups, supplementary health programmes for the entire family</p>	<p>To set up a separate post schooling programme that includes counselling, skill training and career guidance. This could be part of the Children's Programme but might need additional inputs in the form of separate staff and resources from ADATS and the Coolie Sangha.</p> <p>Special funds to develop libraries, space, infrastructure and educational materials for Balakendras.</p> <p>Child Rights Framework to be developed in conjunction with SCNZ which addresses issues such as Child labour, child abuse, gender sensitisation etc.</p> <p>Introduce a rights based approach to the core curriculum taught in Balakendras</p> <p>Support for children with special needs</p>

<i>SCNZ Principles</i>	<i>Current areas of fit between of SCNZ principles and the children's programmes</i>	<i>Potential areas of fit between SCNZ strategy and children's programme/ Need Gaps</i>
Make lifetime investments	<p>Profile of the new generation (educated, individualistic and capable of independent decision making) is different from that of their parents (semi literate and primarily involved with agrarian activities)</p> <p>Programme helps children break free from economic and caste poverty and helps place them on par with peers.</p> <p>Breaks cyclical patterns of poverty, subservience and lack of self motivation</p> <p>Changes child socialization patterns of the coolie community</p>	<p>Continued support of community based programmes with a focus on children in the four taluks.</p> <p>Capacity building and training of Sangha members to reorient the vision of the Sangha and ensure that relevancy is maintained.</p> <p>Incorporation of life skills training and value based education in the children's programme to help them prepare for the future</p>
Work in participatory partnership	<p>ADATS has helped to set up the Coolie Sangha a people's organisation which has overcome poverty, oppression and discrimination by establishing a political identity for members and works on grass root level as well as taluk and district activities</p> <p>ADATS and the Sangha work in tandem, with ADATS providing intellectual inputs on the core curriculum and creative activities for children</p> <p>Children imbibe Sangha 'terminology' and ideology, as they are part of most Sangha and mahila meetings</p>	<p>Involve children and youth in participatory decision making Help initiate clubs for youth which serve as a forum for children to voice their opinions and participate in decision making that impacts their lives. This could have links to balakendras with youth taking on the roles of mentors.</p> <p>Develop relationships with other NGOs, institutions and consultants in the area of education. ADATS to should share their experiences and learn from others.</p>

<i>SCNZ Principles</i>	<i>Current areas of fit between of SCNZ principles and the children's programmes</i>	<i>Potential areas of fit between SCNZ strategy and children's programme/ Need Gaps</i>
Achieve Gender Equality	<p>Mahila meetings act as a forum for women to express their views and to take decisions on issues affecting women's lives. They monitor and coordinate the children's programme and also have the power to veto decisions made by the Sangha.</p> <p>Gender parity established in schools with 48% of the children enrolled being girls.</p> <p>ADATS has introduced a policy that all Balakendra teachers should be women. This to a certain extent introduces the concept of gender sensitisation with women in the age groups of 18-30 serving as role models for children.</p> <p>The Balakendra teacher participates in the Mahila meetings and notes down the minutes. She sets the agenda for the meetings and is influential for setting new directions in terms of decisions and actions taken by the Mahila meeting.</p>	<p>Participatory workshops with children and Mahila meeting members to improve their capacity and aid in their empowerment</p> <p>More training and capacity building of Balakendra teachers</p> <p>Promote women leadership in the Sangha, especially develop a process through which schooled youth, particularly girls are a majority in the emerging cadre.</p> <p>Provide training to women in leadership skills with skills for participation by all (e.g. Group process skill vs individual speech making skills)</p>