



ADATS & the Coolie Sangha

A community sponsorship approach

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The Coolie Sangha

'ADATS and the Coolie Sangha are committed to the unification and organisation of the poor in their struggle for freedom from social oppression and the realisation of human identity, dignity and citizen status.'

– Ram Esteves, Director of ADATS

ADATS' (Agricultural Development and Training Society) approach to social change is holistic – penetrating all aspects of village life through a long-term and sustainable community sponsorship model.

Their goal is the realisation of a community where the poor are united across caste and gender lines. A community where all children are educated, and families can rely on food security through the sustainable use of resources and sound economic development. And in which individuals can claim their own identity with dignity, as valued members of a unified community.

Although ADATS is the parent organisation, the Coolie Sangha exists as a separate organisation in its own right, maintaining its own identity, priorities, roles and responsibilities.

ADATS follows a nine-year intervention strategy to build the individual Coolie Sangha Units. This period is divided into distinct three-year phases – formation, formalisation and consolidation. After this point, ADATS withdraws into the background, leaving a self-sufficient village unit that is supported by the larger Coolie Sangha structure.



The Indian Tapestry

India is a vast sub-continent. Although the country occupies only 2.4% of the world's total land area, it supports 17.5% of the world's population. Its deserts, arid plains and lush tropical rainforests are home to a teeming population of some 1.17 billion people.

For thousands of years rich and poor have lived side-by-side in a heaving myriad of colours and movement. For the majority of the population, Hinduism strictly governs all aspects of life, and it is this religious and socio-political scenario that has led to a traditionally segregated and hierarchical society, based on classes or 'castes'.



The lower castes – the harijans or 'children of god' as Mahatma Gandhi referred to them – along with the poor, the landless, and the uneducated, are fighting for basic human rights and recognition, and the ability to live a life of hope and promise for the future. From this need, grew the Coolie Sangha.

As you drive across the Deccan plateau in Karnataka in Southern India, your gaze sweeps across a landscape of rocky, sunburnt outcrops, breaking through the green scrub and small plots of raggi (golden millet), jola (maize) and ground nut (peanut) that bow under the southern Indian heat. The land is drought prone, with only 560 mm of erratic rainfall breaking the dust and heat each year.

The majority of the those living here in rural India are forced to etch out an existence as 'coolies' – peasant labourers toiling beneath the authority of landlords or 'Ryots'. The story of Rathamma, a single mother to three daughters, is a common tale for poor families growing up in the villages.

'I am the eldest daughter of a very poor family, our financial situation was the worst. I was married at 16 to a man who had nothing – we didn't even have a plate to eat from or a cup to drink water.

I worked in a landlord's house, not for money but just for food, for millet and rice. We were so poor that while I was pregnant with my second child, I was forced to sleep on the temple floor. During the day we had no shelter, and at night we used to go there to sleep.'

With little education and few skills, most coolies are forced to work for landlords in their fields, doing labour intensive agricultural work – or 'coolie works'.

Relying heavily on day-to-day coolie works, with little hope of education, financial support or government intervention, each new generation is born into a cycle of despair.

Narasimhappa recalls his upbringing in Korepalli village. 'At that time there was no work in the village, so my mother and I went to a nearby town for daily labour. We used to get three rupees (€0.04) a day – three rupees for my mother and three rupees for me for being a coolie.

We used to cook only two raggi (millet) balls each day. I had one raggi ball in the morning and the other one in the evening. My mother, she ate nothing – she starved, because she had to feed her son.'

It is easy to believe that this constant struggle that has persisted for so many generations, will only continue. But dramatic change has grown from the resentment and hardships within these homes, and is being embraced by thousands. They are the Coolie Sangha.

The Caste System

Traditionally, the caste system governs every facet of life – stipulating your job, who you marry, who you associate with, even where you may walk and what you can touch. Those born into the poor, lower castes face persecution and prejudice from almost all of society.

Despite caste discrimination being formally abolished by the Indian Constitution of 1950, the entrenched ideology and practice of oppression still governs the lives of millions across the country.

Building the Foundations

'One must throw the ideology on the ground, and watch it break apart. Then the people can pick it up and put it back together again, and embrace it, as they best see fit...'

- Ram Esteves, director of ADATS and patriarch to all Coolie Sangha Units

The Coolie Sangha (or coolie 'association') is a people's membership organisation, comprising of poor peasant families who wish to rid themselves of exploitation, and take control of their own lives. Within each village Coolie Sangha Unit (CSU), this collective of families will take responsibility for, and support, all members, and initiate positive action through development activities – activities funded and undertaken by themselves, for themselves.

The Coolie Sangha gives each individual an identity, and supports them in the struggle for empowerment.

'The situation in the old days was entirely different. Feudalism was in existence – with the Ryots in control.

We used to sing songs which told of the problems of the coolie people – the problems of the lower caste people. But this brought us together, and that is what made us strong.' – Ashwathamma, a 57-year-old grandmother.

Saraswathamma, born into a desperately poor family, and mother to four in Mutyalamma Gudi village, speaks plainly. 'I am not saying that we have all become rich – the poverty is still there... but we have identity in the community. That itself enables us to go forward.'

The Coolie Sangha Unit is primarily a village-based organisation, often numbering up to 50 families. However, to provide additional support and coherence to each independent CSU, larger 'clusters' are formed from a small number of village groups – with each village selecting individuals to represent them at this cluster level. Each cluster is then, in turn, represented at the wider 'taluk' (state administrative region) level.

Over the past three decades, more than 39,000 families have formed Coolie Sangha Units in 899 villages. Collectively, the Coolie Sangha have an active membership of around 62,000 adults and over 22,000 children. ►



'We, the harijan people, were kept separate, we were seen as being different,' remembers Narasimhappa. 'We used to beg from the upper castes, and were not allowed to go into their houses. When they used to give us water, they would pour it into coconut shells.'

Now, because of our political pressure and the Coolie Sangha unity, these people aren't arrogant anymore. Wherever you go now, they will put down mats for us to sit on, they will give us tea and water in glasses, and we are allowed into every house.'

For Narasimhappa, the Coolie Sangha was an opportunity to be seen as a person, and an equal.

'Before the Coolie Sangha, poor people were treated like they were not human beings. We were ill-treated, we didn't have any recognition. We were kept separate from all things.

'When we formed the group, we started opposing these upper caste leaders, saying that we are also

human beings, that we have human rights. You cannot do such things to human beings.'

As awareness of the ideologies and activities of the Sangha grew, so did opposition from the landlords and those who stood to lose the most from the empowerment of the coolie people. For many years anger, protests, and misunderstanding were widespread in the villages.

'When we started the Coolie Sangha meetings here, they came with sticks to beat us. What I would do is leave the other members inside the temple for the meeting, and sit outside and watch to see if anyone was coming. I would sit waiting, with a stick. After that, our new building was constructed and we were able to shift to our own place.'

The birth of the Coolie Sangha was made possible only through the continued work of the ADATS – a long-standing grassroots organisation that strives for pro-poor, sustainable development.

Although very much an independent community-based organisation in its own right, the phenomenal growth and work of the Coolie Sangha Units, at the village, cluster and taluk level, has been guided by the financial, ideological and practical assistance of ADATS over the past 33 years. ▶



Pointing to a fading photo on the mantelpiece, Saraswathamma wipes a tear from her face and quietly tells her story.

'This woman got married to a man from a neighbouring taluk. Her husband was a drunkard, one so bad you couldn't imagine. Every day he used to torture her, until finally one day he poured kerosene over her and burnt her alive.

I realised that her children would be deserted, so I took them into my home and adopted them – they still do not know that I am not their mother.

This is the ideology that the Coolie Sangha teaches, as you sit with your fellow member. I am not special in this – this is what ADATS and the Coolie Sangha teaches us. They have bought this ideology into our minds, and brought this ideology to life...'



'There was a Sangha member called Biradi, everyday he used to drink and beat his wife. She came to the Mahila meeting and asked for assistance.

All the women joined together and asked him to attend the meeting, and they warned him about his behaviour. Then they attacked the rag shop (an informal drinking establishment).

If the rag shop is there in the village, then it is easy for these people to drink. If it is banished, where will they go?



So we closed the shop, and helped the owners to find another type of business – a petty shop. Now our village is dry.'

– Rathnamma.

Nanjundappa, now a second generation Coolie Sangha member, remembers how his mother helped form one of the first Coolie Sangha Units in their village.

‘ADATS approached us, saying ‘Why don’t you release yourselves from the clutches of the landlords by forming your own union?’

‘We began to learn about the difference between landlords and coolie people, about how the landlords exploit the lower castes and other economically backward people. We would slowly learn and discuss these things amongst the members of the Sangha.’

The Coolie Sangha embraces every facet of member families’ day-to-day living. However, the main activities can be broken into agricultural development and training, financial assistance, women’s rights, children, education and community health. Members are also active in local

politics and government, ensuring that the Coolie Sangha families are represented in, and have access to, local and national initiatives.

Beerappa, a Coolie Sangha member for over 13 years, and now an ADATS field officer, has seen the concept of identity within the village change drastically.

‘When people started sitting together every week, and discussing about caste, and economics and everything, slowly prejudices start to disappear. Instead of giving prominence to caste, they started giving prominence to the person, to what you do, to education – and they start giving you respect and identity.’

Each Coolie Sangha Unit is self-financed through a system of sangha *corpus fund* contributions made by families, and the annual declaration of incomes and paying of ‘sangha tax’. These sangha funds, currently standing at more than Rs 75 million

collectively, are integral to member empowerment.

In the years before the Coolie Sangha, a poor labourer would have no hope of accessing a loan or funding from a conventional bank. Now, interest-free Coolie Credit Fund loans are available to all Sangha members who wish to start an economic venture or enterprise, or who seeks finance for an expense.

‘The CSU stopped begging. As we acquire different sources of income for the family, we stop being dependent on others. It has completely banished financial dependency on others. And so we are now self-sufficient.’

Essential to the ongoing success of both ADATS and the Coolie Sangha has been financial contributions from external organisations in the Netherlands, Germany and New Zealand. ■

Women in the Community

Fundamental to the Coolie Sangha has been a process of breaking down old constraints, and questioning social norms. When once a village woman was relegated to the realm of the household and kitchen, married when she reached puberty, and denied schooling, Coolie Sangha women have come together to form a unique bond. This new-found strength allows them to contribute towards, and shape, the society in which they live.

Saraswathamma, now a Coolie Sangha Cluster Secretary, was only a young girl when her life was changed forever.

‘I was still going to school when I got married. At that time, my body was not mature... it was not ready, not fit to get married... but I got engaged. Then, after only one month of becoming mature, my parents forced me to get married. I had my first child at 15, and my second child at 16.’

‘When we used to leave the house, people would look at us in a cheap, sexual way. This attitude also existed in our own homes – we were not allowed to take part in decision making, and we were fixed to the kitchen. We were not even part of the home. We were like slaves – only to cook, and nothing else.’

‘Even if another woman was suffering or had some problem in a neighbouring house – we were not allowed to go visit her and talk with her.’

Mother of two, Narayanamma, explains how the Coolie Sangha has changed her perspective on life as a woman in her village. ‘When I joined Coolie Sangha, I too started thinking I was a human being, I too have some say in the society, and in the household.’

Within all Coolie Sangha units, women are now no longer taking a back seat in family affairs. They are instrumental in securing the family income, and in making strategic decisions that benefit themselves, their family and their community. Women are encouraged to attend the weekly CSU meetings, when members gather together to make strategic decisions about how their coolie sangha will be run, and what activities will be undertaken.

‘When we joined the Coolie Sangha, women began to expose issues pertinent to women, like domestic violence and dowry harassment, and other types of ill treatment. We used to discuss these in the meetings, openly. And women started getting support from the village people.’



'At our Mahila meeting we learn about women's rights and health issues, and the unity of women. A Mahila trainer comes to our meetings and explains many things to us, and through this we gain confidence and unity, and now we have achieved so much.'

The Mahila meetings form an essential platform upon which the Coolie Sangha rests. As well as providing a women-only space to discuss issues and hear grievances, the Mahila is responsible for overseeing the welfare and education of children, as well as general health and social concerns within the village.

The driving force behind the strengthening of the female condition within the Coolie Sangha is a sense of female unity – a 'sisterhood'. And this unity has been fostered further by weekly 'Mahila meetings' – a meeting exclusively for the women of the CSU.

In addition, women also have final veto power over all CCF loan applications (the interest-free loans funded and managed by the Coolie Sangha unit itself).

While initial decisions regarding the granting of Coolie Sangha loans are made in the general meetings, it is at the Mahila meeting where the final decision is made.

Women have the ability to stand up and say, 'If you give my family this loan, my husband will be able to start drinking more. It will not be repaid. Do not give it to us.'

The Women's Fund is another Coolie Sangha initiative, which ensures that those women who run households without male support, due to widowhood, desertion and divorce, have special access to grants and loans. To date, 716 single women have received a total of Rs 10 million in assistance, through the scheme.

Child welfare and education is a major concern of all families within the Coolie Sangha, and under the Mahila group's watchful eye, interventions are common place. The Mahila women have a fighting spirit, and this they use when leading protests – a role they relish in standing up for the rights of all members.

'Because of the support of the Mahila, we have taken on many important decisions, such as the children's programmes and CCF decisions, as well as political and economic decisions – whatever it is we can take it on in the Mahila meetings.

And not only that, if any government officials cause problems or delays in action, we are ready to go and protest!'

Rathnamma, abandoned by her husband and left to provide for her three young girls, became an active voice within her village Mahila group.

'Two years back, the central government initiated the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Every year, all villagers will get 100 days of work, and guaranteed 82 rupees a day. But the local government put fictitious names in the register, and pocketed the wages under these names.

'So we women joined together and staged a protest in front of the government office, saying that we need to see the register, asking, "In which names are wages being paid?"

'The government officials came and apologised to us, and agreed not to claim any wages in fictitious names. We are now getting our full quota of work and wages.'

Mahila protests are characteristically cunning, and distinguished by a passive resistance to corruption and injustice. ►



Venkatalaxmamma, deserted by her husband after just two years of marriage, knows first-hand the power of female unity under the Coolie Sangha.

'There was a disagreement about some land I had saved up for and purchased – a man said that it belonged to him.

One night he came while I was sleeping and poured acid on me... on my face.

At first, I thought it was water and I wiped it and then I looked in the mirror – my whole face was covered in blood. I wiped it with a cloth and all the skin came away.

When he came, I was alone in the house. No one was there. I thought that I would die. I came running from the house screaming for someone to help me.

Immediately all the women came together. They took me straight to the hospital by taxi, and even though it was midnight they knocked on the police station door and lodged a complaint for me. The police arrested the man and he was jailed for three years.

I don't have family – but I have the Coolie Sangha. They are my brothers, my sisters, my mother and father.'

Rathnamma tells of how she was supported by fellow Mahila members in her struggle to persuade the government to sanction her a house.

'We struggled for three months – I was even cooking in the government offices! I was supported by 18 other families, sitting in a group outside the office. Finally, they sanctioned the house in my name.'

Being a woman in the Coolie Sangha is not simply fighting female repression or traditional gender roles. It is about playing an integral role within the community, strengthening and unifying the Coolie Sangha, and finding independence and autonomy for all those who were once dependent on others.

The decision was made that all village Balakendra (an after-school children's programme) teaching positions should be given to women. This means that all young women can access the training and financial stipend that comes with the role, as well as allowing women to feed directly into the minds and changing ideology of future generations.

The Coolie Sangha has not only altered the present, but it has drastically changed the future for generations of women to come.



Rathnamma speaks emphatically, 'Not so long ago child marriages were common in our village. But now they are completely abolished and banned. We are united in that sense, for the girl child.'

Laxmidevi, her 17-year-old daughter chips in, 'Why should we get married at this age? Why shouldn't we continue our college education? We are not going to accept it if our parents ask us to get married. I want to study to be a teacher, so let me finish my education first!'

Rathnamma looks to her three children fondly, 'I don't want my children to be like me, illiterate, I want them to stand on their own. First I want them to get an education, and knowledge. I have only one dream – I don't want my girl children to depend on their husbands. I want them to be independent.' ■



Sangha Interventions

'Let me tell you a story. A lower caste girl fell in love with an upper caste boy. The parents of the boy opposed the marriage, so her parents approached the Coolie Sangha.

We made a plan. We would go to the boy's village, saying we were there to buy some cows. We went to his family's house and took the parent's permission to spend the night with them. Then we explained everything to the boy, and said, "If you love that girl, don't play around, come along with us. We are here to help."

He said, "Alright, but I am scared about my parents, they might desert me. I will not have any family support for the rest of my life – what am I to do?"

"It is okay," we said, "we will shelter you until you get a job."

We arranged a marriage in the Coolie Sangha taluk meeting, with the support of the whole community.

The news spread like a wildfire, and the parents came to our village, saying "Our boy has married a lower caste girl – we can't allow it. We must take back our son." But we opposed them, saying "We are keeping him here, we are sheltering him."

He needed to feed his new family, and so the issue was taken to the Coolie Sangha, and we agreed to a CCF loan for him to start a tender coconut business.

Soon he had repaid the loan and was earning a good income. After one and a half years, his parents returned to the village and apologised. "We didn't know the strength of the Coolie Sangha," they said. "We now realise that our son is able to look after his family, please send him back to our village. We want to care of them."

So the boy and girl returned home, and they are happy living their life, with a new baby boy. He is still continuing with his tender coconut business, and they have joined the Coolie Sangha in their new village.'

- Beerappa, member of the Jambigemardahalli village Coolie Sangha.

*'When I grow up I want to catch the robbers,
so I can help the poor people'*

- GirishBabu, 6.

Growing up with the Coolie Sangha

For societies where life is marked by the oppressive day-to-day struggle to survive, children hold the key to a radically different and positive future.

According to UNICEF, India has the highest number of child labourers under the age of 14 in the world. Eliminating poverty and changing ideologies regarding caste, gender and education is essential to improving child welfare across the country.

Fundamental to changing the lives of coolie families is the empowerment of the next generation – both in terms of obtaining satisfactory formal schooling, and perhaps more importantly, changing the traditional beliefs intrinsic to the society they live within.

Article 46 of the Constitution of India holds that:

'The State shall promote, with special care, the education and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of social exploitation.'

Beerappa explains the importance education had in his household.

'When I was a child, when I used go to school, my parents discouraged me, saying – if you go to school we have to spend more money, if you work with us in the field, you could earn more money every day.

'I don't want that discouragement for my children. I don't allow my children to feel that discouragement.'

At the heart of many of the issues facing the education of rural coolie

children today are the beliefs and attitudes of the parents and community. Parents are very often themselves uneducated and illiterate, and the time-old practice of agricultural labouring forms the basis of life. Very often, parents' decision not to educate a child is informed by a very real economic need – the need to survive.

Laxminarasamma has been a Coolie Sangha member for 12 years, and is not only a cook at the local school, but also a Balakendra teacher and mother of three.

'The way of thinking in the villages is entirely different. Many parents think – I didn't study. I didn't go to school. Am I not feeding my wife? Am I not feeding my children? So what if my children do not go to school? In these older generations, their minds are blocked. Their thinking is blocked.'

The continued efforts of ADATS and the Coolie Sangha, are transforming the ideologies of the community, and bringing about positive change.

'The situation some years back was very different. Once the girl child matured – once her bodied matured – she was not sent outside to school. The Coolie Sangha takes a major role in convincing parents to change their ways, saying "What has happened now the your daughter has become an adult? Why are you not sending her to school like the boys?" Girls are not kept at home now – they are not kept idle. Now they go to school and can do something with their lives.'

'I have few expectations for my children, simply that I don't want my children to be like me, illiterate. I want them to stand on their own. First I want them to become educated, and get knowledge.'

The Balakendra

Fundamental to the education of Coolie Sangha children is the formation of a network of Balakendras, or 'non-formal education centres', in all Coolie Sangha villages. These centres, which open in the evenings after school, have a wide range of books, games and resources available to coolie children, under the management of motivated and specially trained Balakendra teachers.

'Our parents are illiterate – so they cannot help us! If I get confused in my house I will not be guided by anybody, but at the Balakendra there are books, dictionaries and the teacher to help me.' – Balakendra student, aged 10.

Children can come together to learn and play in a supportive and safe environment, free from household distractions. Solar lighting ensures that the erratic flow of electricity supplying most homes in the villages is not disrupted.

'If I start reading in my house, my parents and the other children will disturb me, saying "Go bring some water from the tap, go gather some food for the cows." There are so many disturbances there. But if I go to the Balakendra, I will be free from tensions and household work.



At the Balakendra I can concentrate on my studies and prepare for the next day.’ – NareshBabu, a 15-year-old Balakendra student.

Coolie Sangha parents are proud of the achievements of their children. As their children grow, it reflects the wider development and progress of the community as a whole, as the Coolie Sangha moves into an increasingly promising future.

Both of Narasimhappa’s sons are studying and doing well at the local school in Korepalli village. ‘Ten years back now, there were only two people who had completed their 10th standard in our village. If you needed anything read or written, we used to have to go to them and convince them to help us.

But now, after the Balakendra started, it is very different. None of the children in our village have failed in their school exams – everyone who has gone for the 10th standard has passed.’

The Balakendra also allow the Coolie Sangha to be involved in the running of local government schools. Balakendra teachers will regularly visit the village school to check on their students’ progress.

This allows direct engagement between the families of the Coolie Sangha and the schools. Laxminarasamma smiles as she explains her work as a Balakendra teacher.

‘At least once every three months I will visit the schools and take stock of what is happening there, such as the proportion of syllabus covered. If the government teachers are not completing sufficient material I will complain to the higher officials. We also check whether the school has all the facilities it should – such as whether toilets are built separately for the girl child or not, and whether there is drinking water available.’

Even when children have access to, and are able to attend government schools, the quality of education and services offered them can be appalling, especially for those living in rural areas. A recent UNESCO report, for example, found that 76% of schools in towns have electricity, compared to a mere 27% of rural schools.

Visits by Balakendra teachers ensure that schools are meeting national education standards. Teacher absenteeism, for example, is a problem rife in many Indian schools, as is corruption of the midday meal scheme – a programme to help nourish poor children in several Indian states.



'The Balakendra teachers will keep a secret register of attendance for the government teachers – she will take information from the children about which teachers did not attend school that day. She will then cross-check to ensure the teachers are not cheating the children of their education.

'We also make sure that the mid-day meal is served to the children, and that it is cooked with LPG rather than firewood. They should not use firewood – for climate reasons as well as cleanliness and health.

'What happened in earlier days was that teachers used to send children out to the fields to chop down trees. So it was made compulsory that all schools use gas rather than firewood. But sometimes to make some money teachers still send children to the forest to collect firewood. We make sure that no child is treated in this way.'

'My son is in the Coolie Youth Group right now. In the future he will be active in the Coolie Sangha. Our children are the youth of the Coolie Sangha.'

– Narasimhappa.

As a direct result of the work of ADATS and the Coolie Sangha over the past 28 years, a total of 44,697 children have been supported in their attendance at government schools. Almost 70% of these youth went on to finish high school or college.

In 2009, the Coolie Sangha supported approximately 15,500 children with scholarship and supplementary education. 48% of the supported children are girls, and 52% boys. By comparison, government schools are lucky to have 30% girls in high school.

Each Mahila group also monitors the ongoing education of Coolie Sangha children. They assess each family's ability to fund their children's education – and if necessary provide scholarships from the Sangha corpus fund to assist those families unable to meet costs.

Due to Coolie Sangha intervention in children's welfare, parents now recognise and embrace the full potential of their children, and encourage them in their endeavours and aspirations. With ongoing support, the significance of these next generations in Coolie Sangha communities will continue to grow.

Laxminarasamma explains. 'Now that they are educated, our young people can go and work and live in the urban areas. When they return they bring new ideas to the village – new ideologies. And in turn the new ideas attract other youth who also want these new 'juicy' things, like clothes and motorbikes and travelling on air-conditioned buses in the city.

Every month some will send home money to their families, while others will stay in the villages and work to better our communities.' ■



Village Health Work

Paramount to the work of the Coolie Sangha in the villages is the emphasis placed on health and improved access to primary health services.

Key to this work is the role of the women who function as Coolie Sangha village health workers – women such as Rathamma, who plays an integral role providing medical care to Coolie Sangha members in Ullodu village.

‘As a Coolie Sangha village health worker, I collect medicines every month and distribute them to the 38 Coolie Sangha families. I look after all the health aspects of the village – like a mini-doctor!’

The medical conditions that are faced daily by the health worker can be simple cases that require treatment *in situ* – often infections of

the ears, eyes or throat – while other more serious issues may require the patient to be taken to nearby Bangalore for hospital treatment. In these cases, the Coolie Sangha corpus fund is available to help meet the financial costs of transport and care.

‘I take patients for screening at health camps organised by ADATS. Doctors come to the camps from the city hospitals, and if the patient requires surgery, I will take them to the big hospitals. Sometimes treatment will be free of cost, or at other times there will be a nominal cost.’

‘I helped one woman from this village who was insane. She used to bite, to beat and slap whoever tried to help her. We approached ADATS for assistance, and Ram sent his vehicle to take her to Bangalore,

to the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Science. We took her to this specialised hospital four times for treatment, and all four times she was driven in the ADATS ‘ambulance’.

Altogether her expenses came to around 10,000 rupees, but the whole amount was funded by the Coolie Sangha. And now she is cured – she is working and earning a living now.’

Often, villagers are unaware of the national health benefits and health programmes that are made available to them. For this reason, the village health worker plays a pivotal role as the link between village need and service delivery – in educating villagers in health related matters, and accessing health benefits and services for all Coolie Sangha members.

'There is a very good network supporting the village health worker. I know the doctors in the hospitals very well. Whenever they conduct screening camps in the villages, they inform people like me – the village health worker – in the Coolie Sangha taluk meetings. This makes the network very strong, and whatever information is needed, will be given to the villages.'

Female health is traditionally an area that remains behind closed doors. Village health workers are in an ideal position to bring what was once hidden, out into the open.

'As a village health worker, I have treated a number of patients suffering from uterine prolapse. This is a dangerous condition for village women that can occur as a result of poor health and bad deliveries. In the villages what traditionally happens after the baby is born is they tie the stomach with a cloth. This is an age-



old belief, but what can happen is that the uterus will come down, and they start experiencing problems.

If the condition it is detected in the first or second stages, then it is okay, they can be cured relatively easily. But if it has gone on to the third stage, it can become a serious

problem for the woman – sometimes she may be unable to walk. She may develop a foul stench and become incontinent.

I have taken some ten patients from this village to hospital for treatment. And now they are all happy!

Family planning

As Coolie Sangha members increasingly embrace the potential of children, women and the family unit, and the need to rely solely on labour-intensive coolie works decreases, there is a growing need for members to adopt modern family planning values and practices. And top of the list for Coolie Sangha families is female sterilisation.

As part of India's 'National Family Welfare Programme', sterilisations are offered free to all families across India.

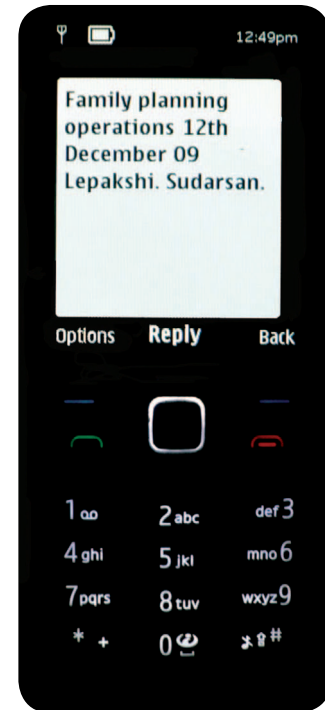
The simple operation, which is offered free of charge, is seen as yet another opportunity for women to take an active role in the evolution of the family.

'People were uneducated before, and they were not questioning the size of families. People would have six or seven kids, even a dozen! Now we are educated, and know the consequences of big families.

'The Mahila trainers will notify the Mahila group when the operation is to take place in the local hospital. In our village, almost 75% of women have chosen to have the operation, the majority after two children. There are even some families who undertake the operation after only one child – irrespective of the gender of the child.

'The government encourages all women in India to take part in the Family Planning Programme, but many people are simply not making use of it.

'It is only through organisations like ADATS and the Coolie Sangha that people are made aware of it, and families are encouraged to use this type of programme.' - Beerappa, father of two. ■



The Coolie Credit Fund

For poor families living in rural villages across India, securing loans from conventional financial sources such as banks is almost impossible. With no assets and sporadic incomes from agricultural labour and small holdings, these avenues are simply out of reach.

Nazeer Ahmed, a senior ADATS staff member, has over twenty years experience working with Coolie Sangha loans. In his time as an extension worker he authorised over 11,000 loans, with a repayment rate of 87%. Traditional financial institutions across India struggle to achieve 60% repayment of loans.

'If you need a loan from the banks, you have to pay 15-20% in bribes, plus 10-15% in interest on the loan amount, let alone the huge amount of paper work and guarantees required. For these families, this is not possible.'

Instead, coolie families had to approach the only people with the means to assist them – the landlords. Aware of the dire situation of the coolie people, the landlord would often abuse the situation in their own favour.

In some cases, a family member would be sent to the landlord to work as a 'bonded labourer' – in a relationship alarmingly close to slavery. At other times land or other 'services' would be demanded in return.

'With this financial dependency came many social ills. If I approached the landlord, what he could do is say, "You have two acres of land – register it in my name and I will give you the 500 or 1,000 rupees you need." I can tell you that 25-50% of the land that the big landlords own now were obtained in this way. It is exploitation of the poor and grabbing their lands.'

Narasimhappa, a father of two and Coolie Sangha Cluster Secretary, tells how, as a teenager, he helped his family build their house. 'To bring the 500 rupees (€8) extra that we needed to build our house, I worked for two years as a bonded labourer in a neighbouring village.

'I had to irrigate the land, and divert the water canals throughout the day.



Once every eight days I was allowed to come home to visit, but for the rest of the time I would stay at work.'

Nanjundappa, a father of two, recalls just how far the landlords could go in their exploitation of poor families.

'In the old days the prevailing coolie wage was just three rupees (€0.04) per day. There were cases where a woman, or her family, needed 50 or 100 rupees (€1.50).

'She would go to the landlord for the money, and the landlord used to exploit her. I don't know how to say it – but he would exploit her sexually. "Okay. Sleep with me for the whole night and I will give you 100 rupees in the morning." That was the situation.'

Integral to the emancipation of its members, each CSU establishes a Coolie Sangha fund. Each year, a small percentage of every family's income is paid into this collective fund.

This fund then becomes available to all members in the form of interest free or 'soft' Coolie Credit Fund (CCF) loans. As a result, any member can acquire the financial support needed to begin their own business or venture, and start down the path to economic independence.

Beerappa explains how the CCF scheme has impacted his village of Jambigemarahalli.

'To feed our families, we have to first buy seed. We didn't have the money to do this, but the Coolie Sangha supported us through the CCF. I was awarded a loan of 2,800 rupees (€45) for planting my lands. In this way we became independent. We can now cultivate our own lands.

'I quickly repaid this loan, and I received a second loan of 8,000 (€85) rupees. With that money I purchased a sewing machine. My wife can use it to stitch and sell clothes. In this way we have doubled our family income.



'Another family in the village was given a loan of 8,000 rupees, and with it they purchased some five sheep. Now their livestock has gone up to 40 sheep – the sheep are breeding and they double or triple every year! If they were to sell the sheep now they would get 80,000 or even 100,000 rupees(€1585)!' ■

The Soil Revolution

At the heart of the continued suppression of coolie labourers, is a dependence on the Ryots or landlords for work, and consequently, their livelihood. Giving coolie families the ability to grow their own food and raise livestock, on their own land, has meant families can claim a new sense of autonomy, free of the caste-domination that has for so long been intrinsic to life in rural India.

Beerappa, father of two in Jambigemaradahalli village, recalls how he came to embrace the Coolie Sangha.

‘One of the things that attracted me to the Coolie Sangha was the Dry Land Development Programme. I have a piece of land, about three acres, and it would take me a long time to make any of it useful.

With this programme, you can see a group of people of different castes united together, carrying out work on someone’s land to make it arable.’

After Coolie Sangha Units have been active in a village for four years, ADATS initiates a programme aimed at improving member’s small and generally unproductive plots of land – the Dry Land Development Programme (DLDP). ADATS financially supports each member to undertake 100 days of labour, which is used to collectively work on each other’s land.

‘The Coolie Sangha members split themselves into work gangs and descend on each person’s land to do labour intensive works. While each land-owner decides on the work needed on her or his land, ADATS staff provide technical advice and monitors the work.’





Over the past 22 years, ADATS has invested 93.8 million rupees in the form of DLDP wages, to allow Coolie Sangha members to undertake soil and water conservation works on 71,551 acres of coolie-owned lands. By working together, the CSU can turn individual member's poor quality land into more productive and viable plots – allowing families to begin to farm their own crops, and free themselves from a life dependant on others.

Nanjundappa explains the importance of the DLDP scheme in the progression of the Coolie Sangha. 'We used to only get a handful of work from the landlords. The DLDP drastically reduced this dependency on landlords. So these landlords were cursing like anything at Ram and ADATS – they did not know where this fellow came from who started giving their labourers work for 100 days, and encouraged them to work on their own lands!

'It ended up that the landlords were not getting sufficient labourers to work on their lands. They became jealous, and started fights in the villages. For us, when we went to our fields in the morning, we did not know whether in the evening we would come back home or not.

'Nowadays, if we do decide to work for the landlords, we fix the labour rates – if we say 100 rupees they have to pay us 100 rupees. If they demand more from us, we can reject it and the next day we won't go. When we used to work on the landlords land, it was from 8 am to 6 pm. Now it is only from 10 to 5pm! This is Coolie Sangha power – with the support of ADATS.'

Father of two, Pemmi Reddy talks about how the DLDP helped him to start providing for his family by growing millet. 'My land is about three acres, but it was not level, it was full of slumps and hills and stones.





'It looked like a small hill station over there! Only one acre was actually cultivatable. With the help of the other Coolie Sangha members, we went to my land and worked very hard. About 47 people worked for 18 days over six years. We levelled the land, and made a check-dam to stop water flow and reduce soil erosion. Because of this, my family now has a full three acres of land that is being used for cultivation.'

Nanjundappa explains how they were taught to use *bunds* on their land, to help the land level itself naturally as the soil erodes.

'The lands are not level – when the rain comes the upper surface of the land will be washed away. A bund is like a wall, and is built from the stones and rocks removed from the land itself, to hold back this erosion and level out the angle of the land. This will also help retain the fertility and moisture in the soil.'

The initial objective of the DLDP was to enable agricultural labourers to cultivate their own scattered plots and become self-supporting, subsistence farmers. Having successfully developed these agricultural practices, the struggle has now turned to finding more sustainable land-use practices, ensuring food security in the face of increasingly erratic rains. A move from traditional ground crops to tree-based crops has given the DLDP a new focus.

ADATS has been quick to take advantage of the possibilities that changing to a more stable tree-based agricultural system provides.

Not only will tree crops, such as mango and tamarind, bring in a more reliable and increased income, but there is potential to tap into a changing global market place, and create a Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) reforestation project under the Kyoto Protocol – selling carbon emission reduction credits on the international market for the benefit of Coolie Sangha families. ■

'It is a matter of prestige. To leave your land barren is shameful – thinking that, everyone started cultivating their lands.'

Beerappa, the father of two children in Jambigemaradahalli village.

Going Green

ADATS' CDM Biogas project, established in 2005, was the first pro-poor emission-reduction project of its kind to be registered in the world. 'Nearly 5,500 coolie women and their families have directly benefited from having biogas units fitted in their houses over the last four years,' explains Ram Esteves, director of ADATS.

A second Biogas project is already registered and underway, while a pilot reforestation CDM project is currently awaiting validation.

Bagepalli CDM Biogas Programme

Sitting inside Venkatalaxmamma's petty shop, which also serves as bedroom, lounge and kitchen, she prepares small cups of sweet, steaming hot milky chai on her small gas cooker, before talking about her life with the Coolie Sangha.

She speaks of the Sangha as her family, and it quickly becomes apparent why. Abandoned by her husband, and the victim of a brutal acid attack, she joined the Coolie Sangha ten years ago, when it started in her village.

Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)

By signing up to the Kyoto Protocol, countries agree to reduce or limit their greenhouse gas emissions. The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) allows developing countries to establish emission-reduction projects, and to trade certified emission reduction (CER) credits to carbon producers, in an international carbon market.

The benefits are two-fold. Industrialised countries buy CERs to help meet reduction targets, allowing more flexibility than meeting commitments on home soil. From the perspective of developing countries, the mechanism promotes sustainable development opportunities, and allows the development of pro-poor emission-reduction projects that not only increase the standard of living, but also generate a substantial financial reward.

‘At the time I needed unity, I needed someone to support me – that’s why I joined. I was all alone.’

For Venkatalaxmamma, a recent and dramatic benefit of Coolie Sangha involvement has been the installation of a biogas unit. Biogas fuels a small cooking stove in her kitchen, and also produces a rich slurry bi-product that can be used as manure for crops.

Venkatalaxmamma takes us outside, behind her small house, to show us the biogas unit at work. It is comprised of a large brick tank built beneath the ground, in which cattle dung decomposes to produce methane gas. One biogas unit requires 10 to 15 kilograms of cow dung daily to function effectively. Not owning a cow herself, Venkatalaxmamma relies on dung from her neighbour’s animals.

She shows us how she mixes the dung with water, allowing the mixture



to flow down into the tank. Sloshing ample water down after it, she reseals the tank and stands back to let the process begin.

As a single woman, the biogas unit was built with the help of the village CSU members, under the guidance of ADATS field staff who have

committed long hours in testing and implementing the CDM project in the area.

The difference the biogas unit has made to not only her life, but to the lives of thousands of other Coolie Sangha women and families is marked. ►



'I used to walk up to four kilometres to collect firewood. I would spend two days a week collecting the fuel, and I'd have to close my shop. I used to cut down big trees and branches. It was a very difficult and tough job – I would get scratches all over my body.

'All the women would do this – five or 10 women would go together. We used to carry some 10 to 15 kilograms of wood home. We would leave in the early morning, at six o'clock, and it would be six hours before we returned home. And then I would have to cook the food as well.

'When I was using firewood, all the vessels and even the wall would turn black from the carbon. My eyes used to get a burning sensation as I leant over the fire, and they would water. I used to have to spend about three hours like this, cooking over the fire.

'But with the biogas unit – there are so many changes now. Even at midnight you can cook something. If you have guests no problem, you just turn it on and woosh! And I am much healthier...'

In another village, the parents of two boys, Nagarathamma and Pemmi Reddy, talk about the difference biogas has made to their family's daily routine.

'Before biogas, my wife would start cooking at six in the morning, and it would take until 9.30 to prepare the food. My children used to go to school in a different village, and their teachers would tell them off because they were always late. Now our children are very punctual, they will be in the school one hour before it starts!'

Nagarathamma tells how her health suffered from cooking on an open fire. 'I had to get an operation. I used to get a heavy cough, and because of that the pain started. Now I don't have any problems, it is very easy now.'

Taking advantage of the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) makes sense. On average, each family uses over two tonnes of non-renewable wood fuel per year. Forests are now slowly replenishing themselves, with over 86 tonnes of wood per year being saved from fireplaces in Kondavulapalli village alone.

The CO₂ emission reductions from using biogas are estimated at 3.56 tonnes of CO₂ per family, per year. With 5,485 biogas units operational across Coolie Sangha villages, 19,526 CERs are being created for trading on the international market.

Aside from the significant improvement in living standards that biogas can bring, a direct financial reward also reaches the families that operate the units. The Bagepalli Biogas CDM project has a 21 year lifespan. For the first seven years, income generated from the sale of CERs goes back to the project financier – in this case, Velcan Energy of France – who initially funded the project.

Thereafter, the direct recipients of CER revenue will be the coolie women themselves. This equates to about 3–4,000 (€60) rupees per annum, a doubling of income for many coolie families.

ADATS is set to expand on the 5,485 units currently in place, with an additional 18,000 units in the planning, which will directly benefit Coolie Sangha families across the region.

Bagepalli CDM Reforestation Project

ADATS is also taking advantage of the benefits that alternative CDM projects can offer Coolie Sangha members, with a new reforestation CDM pilot project currently being validated. Thousands of saplings are ready and waiting to be planted on village lands – replacing traditional food crops such as millet and peanut with less vulnerable tree crops.

Characteristic of the Karnataka region, sporadic and unpredictable rainfall means that small-holder farmers are at the mercy of the weather. 'There is always erratic rainfall. It is supposed to rain in June, but it will rain in September,' explains Towfeeq Ahmed, a senior ADATS staff member.

With food security of the utmost concern, the reforestation project will systematically convert traditional crops to harvestable trees such mango, tamarind, sapota (sapodilla) and jambu (wax apple).

Pemmi Reddy, an agricultural labourer in the remote village of Vadigiri, calculates the difference in income he can earn from moving his three acres of millet over to tamarind. 'Now I get about 15 bags of millet, and out of that I am getting about 15,000 rupees (€240) per annum income. If I plant tamarind trees in my plot, with 40 mature trees per acre, I can expect 240,000 rupees (€3800) per year.'

Pemmi Reddy plans to convert his land over to trees in stages, making sure he can still harvest enough millet to feed his family during the transition period. And in six years when the tamarind trees mature, he can plant millet between the trees.

In addition to the increased income and reliability of changing to tree crops, Pemmi Reddy and his family will also enjoy the added income from the CDM project after the first seven years of the project – from selling the CER credits his trees will generate, to industrialised countries.

Looking further afield – The Fair Climate Network

ADATS has been pivotal in the establishment of the Fair Climate Network (FCN) – a network of forty like-minded NGOs across India. Keen to pass on the vital knowledge and experience gleaned from over 30 years in the field, Ram Esteves and his team want to ensure that their expertise is available to other organisations wanting to develop a range of pro-poor carbon emission-reduction projects.

The FCN will work with organisations to set up projects, aid in the data collection necessary to establish carbon emission baselines and projections, and ensure that projects meet validation requirements through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). ■





Pemmi Reddy & Nagarathamma

Pemmi Reddy, a small-hold farmer and father of two, lives with his wife Nagarathamma in the remote village of Vadigiri. They talk to us about the impact joining the Coolie Sangha has had on their life.

Pemmi Reddy: 'I came to this village ten years ago when I got married, and that is when I joined the Coolie Sangha. I never went to school - I can only sign my name. My wife does the reading and writing, she studied until sixth standard.'

Nagarathamma: 'Education was hard because I was female, but it was even worse for my elder sister, she didn't go to school at all. Her job was to look after the younger sisters and brothers.'

'I have two brothers – they both studied up to tenth standard. After I passed my sixth standard, I was immediately transferred from the education department to animal husbandry!'

Pemmi Reddy: 'I used to go to the landlords for daily labour. There was no other option for us – I had to earn money for our livelihood. Now, because of the Coolie Sangha, there is no need to go to them anymore. I am working for myself, producing my own crops. In fact – I now have three sources of income!'

'Because of the Dry Land Development Programme, my land has been cleared for four years. With the help of the Coolie Sangha, we went to my land and worked very hard, and now my land is level and useful.'

'Four years back I got a loan from ADATS of 3,500 rupees to help with cropping. I saved the profit from that crop, and I bought one cross-bred cow. And now I take the milk from that cow and sell it to the local milk collective.'

'Recently, we got a CCF loan of 10,000 rupees to start a small shop in our house. This means I can work on my land, and I can do business at home – so there is no need to go and work for anyone!'

'Whatever I have now is because of the Coolie Sangha's help – without that I would not have reached this far.'

Nagarathamma: 'We also got biogas three years ago. Before that I used to go and collect firewood, it was very hard. It wasn't very easy to cook food – the family used to go without food, and the children were often hungry. The biggest advantage of having the biogas unit is that there is now no need to go to the forest to collect firewood.'

'Cooking for me has become very easy, I can just switch on the stove and get some rice, and then I can even go away and do something else in my shop!'

'The children are in sixth and ninth standard. Before biogas, they were always very worried about food – when will we cook, when are we going to get a meal? Now they are not concerned – they know that they are going to get their meal – and they can spend their time studying. That is why they are schooling so well.'

'Because of the biogas, you can see the small kids and the women in the village are becoming healthy.'

Pemmi Reddy: 'Ten years ago, we didn't know about the environment. We were not aware of the situation that we are all facing now. We had no idea about the future. What we needed then was to level the land and to grow crops, and to feed my family.'



Nagarathnamma: ‘Now our lands are level, and everything is okay. But we are not getting the proper rains on time. That is why we are planning to switch from food crops to tree crops. And after seven years, like biogas, we are going to get the carbon credit revenues.’

Pemmi Reddy: ‘For the past four years we have been talking about climate change and the environment a lot – and learning about the CDM projects.’

‘Now we are completely changed, we are modernised parents.’

- Nagarathnamma

Nagarathnamma: ‘What our parents did, the type of cultivation they practised, we are not following. We are inventing new techniques, so that we don’t have to work as hard as they did.’

‘We are concerned about the work our children will have to do. They will not have to do all these types of agricultural practices in the future, because they are educated.’

‘That is why we are planning to switch to tree crops. By the time they grow up, the trees will also be grown up, they will be producing fruit, and they will be getting enough money. So they will be taken care of very well.’

‘My parents used to dig wells and do building construction work. They used to carry sand on their heads. In the future, we are not going to do that type of work – we are planning all the best things for our children.’

‘At that time, our parents were not thinking about family planning. Nowadays, what we are thinking is, if we only have a small family, we can educate our children, we can buy them books and clothes, and we can take care of their livelihood.’

Pemmi Reddy: ‘Our children’s futures will be very different from us, and our parents.’

Thanks to the continued work of ADATS, Pemmi Reddy and Nagarathnamma’s family, along with every other Coolie Sangha family, can now look forward to a bright and promising future – armed with dignity, identity, unity and strength. ■

'Seeing a group of people of different castes, all sitting together and eating together, irrespective of religion and gender... with that unity, we can achieve anything.'

– Narasimhappa, farmer and father of two in Korepalli village.

