The Sangham Strategy: Lessons for a Cooperative Mode of Production[1]

Sourayan Mookerjea[2]

Abstract

Dalit women farmers in the district of Medak, Andhra Pradesh, India formed a mutual aid credit cooperative (MACC) in the early 1990s with the support of a development NGO, the Deccan Development Society (DDS). In India, mutual aid credit cooperatives come out of a new wave of reform that emerged within the Indian cooperative movement as transnational financial institutions began to gain control of microfinance banking. Taking the DDS-MACC as an example of the "new cooperativism," this essay reports on the work and struggle of nonliterate and landless Dalit women farmers in organizing a network of credit and marketing cooperatives into an egalitarian political body of production they call a *Sangham* (a term derived from Buddhist traditions). The essay outlines the conjunctural transformations through which the subordination of Dalit small farmers to national and world-scale assemblages of domination and accumulation by dispossession have increased in recent decades; it describes the formation of the *Sangham* network and its projects for gaining autonomy and draws some general theoretical conclusions from the *Sangham* strategy regarding the historical situation of the new cooperativism.

Crisis, credit, and mutual aid cooperatives

Only when the world's most powerful social classes saw their blue-chip ponzi scheme collapse like a house of cards did news of a crisis of capitalism briefly infiltrate the sound-byte synthesizers of corporate media. Not only was it a freeze up of credit, but also a failure of trust, it was eventually and incredulously conceded. Yet the vast majority of the world's population have had their lives thrown into crisis ever since the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s forced the deregulation, privatization and commodification of collectively produced value serving a wide range of public and social needs, enabling its transfer to a new alliance of transnational ruling classes. If the new cooperativism is indeed new, it has its roots in the survival strategies invented by the dispossessed out of their experiences of such crises.

This essay describes one such experiment in the new cooperativism of our times

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and tries to draw some general theoretical lessons regarding the politics of cooperative strategy by examining the historical limits through which the new cooperativism proceeds. To this end, I report here on the work and struggle of nonliterate and landless Dalit women farmers in organizing a network of credit and marketing cooperatives in Andhra Pradesh, India.

Such cooperatives are called "mutual aid credit cooperatives" (MACC) in India and they come out of a new wave of reform that emerged within the Indian cooperative movement after transnational financial institutions gained control of microfinance banking. Working with a development NGO, the Deccan Development Society (DDS), in the early 1990s the Dalit women in the Andhra Pradesh district of Medak (about 100 kilometers northwest of Hyderabad in central India) formed the DDS-MACC. At the time, Andhra Pradesh was the epicenter of both farmer suicides and the entrance of transnational agribusiness corporations into Indian agriculture. In the face of such developments, these women embarked upon a larger political-existential project involving the pursuit of a range of autonomies. Backed by the tenuous financial resources of the DDS- MACC, they seek to achieve autonomy over food production, access to seeds and other natural resources, access to markets and, through all of these, autonomy in their livelihoods and for their communities' future. To this end, they began to organize themselves into a network of village based councils they call "the *Sangham*."

The term *Sangham* derives from the Buddhist conception of an egalitarian and cooperative political community that was formed by the Buddhist movement in the fifth century BCE. The term's use in this context can be understood in light of the revival of Buddhism by Dalit mass conversions in the twentieth century. The great Dalit intellectual-activist B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), who is also the author of the Indian Constitution, converted to Buddhism in 1956 after developing a socialist political theory and praxis based in Buddhism as a cultural strategy against Brahmanical hegemony. Subsequently, more than ten million Dalits have followed Ambedkar's example.

My discussion of the Dalit women's cooperative Sangham strategy is organized in three parts. First, I outline the conjunctural transformations through which the subordination of Dalit small farmers to national and world-scale assemblages of domination and accumulation by dispossession[3] have increased over the last thirty to forty years. Drawing on interviews with Sangham women and DDS personnel I carried out in December 2005, I then describe the formation of the Sangham network and its projects for gaining autonomy. I finally draw some general theoretical conclusions from the Sangham strategy regarding the historical situation of the new cooperativism.

The real subsumption of subaltern production

Agriculture in post-colonial India can be usefully considered in terms of three conjunctural periods: (1) a national-development era in the decades immediately following national independence in 1947, (2) a transitional period during the 1980s over which the agricultural sector was largely privatized and multinational agribusiness corporations entered the scene, and (3) the current post-liberalization period beginning in 1991 and characterized by the "Gene Revolution" and the dominant political roles played by U.S. based biotechnology firms and multinationals.

The national-development era laid the groundwork for the transformations that followed in several ways.[4] As the Indian peasantry occupied a key strategic position in the configuration of interests making up the decolonization movement led by the Indian National Congress, and as self-sufficiency in food production was initially seen as a priority by the political elite, the first thirty years after national independence in 1947 saw agriculture protected and supported through various input subsidies and infrastructure development programs. Two significant achievements of this era were the establishment of the Public Distribution System for Foodgrains (as a measure for averting famines) and the Agricultural Price Commission in 1965 (to assure minimum price supports for farmers and food security for poor consumers).[5] Such "pro-poor" policies were viewed with some urgency as means of securing the hegemony of the industrial elite over both urban and rural middle and subaltern classes, as peasant political mobilization in India, and Asia more generally, remained a characteristic geopolitical feature of the emerging Cold War conjuncture.[6] In fact, Andhra Pradesh was annexed into the Indian Union when the Nizam of Hyderabad invited the Indian Army in to suppress the Telangana peasant revolt in 1946-51.[7] (A peasant insurgency has emerged once more in the region--part of the so-called "Maoist movements"--as the crisis I describe below deepened). The "non-aligned" hegemonic classes, playing both sides of the fence, collaborated with the American Cold War strategy of the Green Revolution which sought to pull out the "root causes" of communism, so it was said, by "solving" the problems of hunger and poverty in the countrysides of the former colonies of Europe. However, the modernization and industrialization of agriculture was carried out unevenly in India. Anxious to prove the Green Revolution experiment a success, the government directed resources to regions already possessing better irrigation and transportation infrastructure, larger landholdings, and more political influence in New Delhi. In turn, big farmers were able to draw more resources toward themselves. Connected with all this was the collapse of the national liberation movement's promise of land reform to the rural subaltern classes, leaving intact landlordism in the midst of growing numbers of landless peasants. The result was a belt of better-resourced agriculture concentrated mostly in Gujarat, the Punjab, and Haryana. On the

other hand, small farmers on holdings of less than 2 hectares produce the largest share of food for domestic consumption, without access to any irrigation at all.[8] While some areas of Andhra Pradesh are irrigated, high on the barren and rock-strewn Deccan Plateau, the Dalit farmers of Medak depend entirely on the uncertain seasonal rains.

Uneven development, incomplete land reform, and the invidious class formation of the Green Revolution were by no means the only problems to emerge out of this "national development" era of postcolonial India. We need to note three further characteristics of the legacy of this period. First is the abysmal failure of the Indian welfare state to deliver social services to the countryside, not only health care but also--and especially--education. India's mixed system of public and private schools allows those who can afford it to purchase quality education privately leaving the public system insufficiently supported through taxation in a state of disarray that is, in the words of Amartya Sen, "very depressing."[9] Not only are large numbers of Indian farmers left non-literate by this disarray of rural education, their non-literacy also exacerbates their dependency on the managerial complex of the agribusiness multinationals to the same degree as it secures the managerial complex's monopoly of technical information over the farmers. The second characteristic of the legacy of the national development era in Indian agriculture is the "modernization" of caste and patriarchal ideologies turned virulent by the uncertainties and anxieties provoked by the faceless chain of dependencies of capitalist agriculture.

Lastly, as Green Revolution ideologies and methods spread from northwestern India, farmers increasingly became dependent upon a national network of agricultural research institutes, private companies, public authorities, and a technocratic apparatus of agricultural management. This dependency has two main aspects to it that are both sites of struggle in the Sangham women's search for autonomy. On the one hand, there is a dependency based on access to key farm inputs, especially seeds and fertilizer, as seeds bred by research institutes and private companies displace those which used to be collected and saved by farmers themselves. Along with industrially produced, petrochemical based fertilizers, seeds and pesticides would, moreover, now have to be purchased. On the other hand, these "modern" components of agriculture now require monopolized instructions on their use, immediately disqualifying and rendering obsolete whatever agro-ecological knowledge farmers have traditionally taught across generations. Over the 1980s, national and multinational agribusiness corporations increasingly gained access to markets created by this managerial complex.[10] With the official liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, American and European based multinationals have gained even greater control over agricultural policy.

But in the project of neocolonizing Indian agriculture, the agribusiness

multinationals have not had to go it alone. They have been able to count on the World Bank's sustained attack on the Indian Public Distribution System for Foodgrains. For ideological and strategic reasons--but citing real problems of bureaucratic ineptitude and corruption--the World Bank leaned heavily on the Government of India to scale back and reduce the scope of the PDS, if not scrap it altogether. In 1992 the government caved to these pressures, and, in the name of more efficient targeting of the poor, tightened access to the program and reduced its scope. Most commentators and critics of the Indian PDS agree the program was in need of reform. (The Sangham women have moreover argued that the PDS's reliance on wheat and rice as staples was not the best nutritional alternative.) But the World Bank's prescriptions have only increased the endemic hunger of the poor and worsened the incidence of malnutrition, especially of women and children.[11] The second aspect of the post-national development era rural crisis that is crucial to understanding the struggles of the Sangham involves the efforts of large agribusiness, led by Monsanto, to impose a second Green Revolution--sometimes called the "Gene Revolution"--on Indian farmers. U.S. biotechnology corporations have lobbied persistently to get markets established for their products in India and they have pushed aggressively to obtain the regulatory changes that would allow this. Their major victory in this campaign was the 2002 National Seed Policy soon followed by The Seed Bill of 2004. The former completed a process begun with the New Policy of 1988 and opened wide the door to the agribusiness multinationals to market their seeds in India by freeing the import and export of all seeds. The Seed Bill of 2004 went further by making seed registration compulsory for farmers who saved, exchanged or sold their seeds for agricultural purposes. The bill, in effect, made the traditional practice among small farmers of saving and exchanging seeds illegal.[12] The new legislation thus not only sought to secure a monopoly space for agribusiness seed producers but also posed the danger that seed registration would facilitate biopiracy wherein biotechnology companies appropriate indigenous agro-medical knowledge and gain intellectual property protection for such knowledge in the U.S. But the small farmers were cornered in a dilemma, since without seed registration biopiracy would take place anyway. These regulatory changes consequently struck at what little autonomy the small farmer retained after the reorganization of agriculture by the first Green Revolution, intensifying their exploitation and the expropriation of value through the articulation of local and global markets with the anti-market of corporate monopolies.

Moreover, Monsanto introduced Bt. cotton[13] in India at a time when the news of farmer suicides could no longer be ignored. Caught in debt and facing crop failure just when whatever minimal social security publicly organized during the national development era was being withdrawn, thousands of farmers were being driven to suicide across India. The situation in Andhra Pradesh has been particularly dire.[14] Indeed nothing else makes as starkly apparent the

devastating crises of agriculture that have followed in train of the attempt by a coalition of Indian and international ruling classes over the last quarter century to subsume, as Karl Polanyi[15] argued, rural society under the market mechanism. The Dalit women farmers of Medak thus face the greatest adversities of the subaltern classes of the region. Caste discrimination during land reforms after national independence resulted in their receiving the least arable land. Patriarchal inheritance norms then leaves many Dalit women landless and most enter farm wage labour, as sexist and caste assumptions underlying the division of labour (along with illiteracy) bar these women from many other better protected occupations. The retreat of the state from rural development and privatization in the agricultural sector, especially after liberalization in the early 1990s, however, has also greatly reduced the availability of rural employment. Men and women continue to leave the countryside, making for a ready supply of low wage, politically vulnerable labour in the cities. Women in particular are absorbed in the informal sector, especially in domestic service as well as the poorly regulated construction industry where many women are employed building India's high tech IT parks.[16] The contradictions and conflicts between rural and urban India (and ultimately, the urban world economy) thus continue to intensify. For the rural crisis, it needs to be noted, is of considerable benefit to the more privileged corners of the world economy as the lowest wages in any economy keeps the cost of all other wages down and the relayed savings is thereby available to trickle up toward any effective monopolies as privately appropriated profit.[17] As these social and ecological crises began to grow, the Dalit women of Medak began to organize themselves into a network of agricultural Sanghams.

The Sangham strategy

The Deccan Plateau is where the cooperative movement in India first broke ground. Agrarian uprisings of the indebted poor, who were losing their land to the exactions of money-lenders in the late nineteenth century, prompted the British imperial government to establish credit cooperatives. The cooperative movement has since become a large and omnipresent feature of social, economic and political life in India. After independence, cooperatives were promoted by both state level and central governments with mixed results. The network of producers, credit and housing cooperatives of the Self Employed Woman's Association (SEWA) and the national dairy cooperative, Amul, are not only successes but rank among the world's largest cooperatives. The latest wave of expansion among the cooperative sector, dating from the early 1980s, involved the growth of microfinance credit cooperatives in response to rural crises remarkably similar to that which brought about the inaugural Cooperative Societies Act of 1904.[18]

In 1983, community development activists founded the Deccan Development

Society (DDS) and began working in Zaheerabad, Medak in order to convert a development project abandoned by a private company into environmentally sustainable rural employment by bringing stony and degraded fallows into cultivation. Following trends in both the Dalit civil rights movement and the rural cooperative movement in Andhra Pradesh and other regions of India of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dalit women in Medak began to organize themselves into affinity "self-help" groups or voluntary associations for organizing microcredit funds in order to rent fallows. The DDS facilitated the process and arranged a state start-up grant for the initiative. After liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 and the emergence of private commercial banks after 1992, Mutually Aided Cooperatives began to be set up as a reform movement in the cooperative sector in order to counter the take-over of microfinance self-help banks by large private commercial banks such as Citi Financial, GE Money and HSBC's Pragati Finance.[19] The current Sangham network of agricultural cooperatives have their roots in these "chit fund" Mutual Aid Cooperatives. Their credit and marketing cooperative, the Deccan Development Mutually Aided Credit Cooperative Society, remains the core institution from which they have over the years launched a range of collective projects for autonomy.

The women's Sangham councils are now active in about seventy-five villages and over five thousand women belong to the credit cooperative. In the intervening twenty years, the Sangham have brought under organic and biodiverse cultivation over ten thousand acres of degraded land and produce over six million kilograms of local millets, sorghum, and pulses annually. Over the years, the Sangham women have also assumed responsibility for more and more aspects of the everyday operations of the DDS and now form the major part of its think tank and core management team. Bringing these women together with environmental scientists and development workers, the DDS serves as an advisory board for the Sangham network as well as their fundraiser for seeking and receiving development project funding from a wide range of sources including the Indian government, Indian and European development agencies as well as on occasion UNESCO and the International Development Research Council of Canada (IDRC). In this way, the DDS also gives organizational form to a political alliance between literate, mostly urban, environmental movements and the rural, subaltern feminism of non-literate women.

The Sangham network attempts to embody a principle of autonomy through placing emphasis on access and local control. In this they understand themselves to be bringing back to life both Buddhist egalitarian political ideals as well as traditional norms of Dalit community self-organization. Membership in a village Sangham costs roughly a third of a day's wages per month which covers administrative costs for each Sangham's bank account with the credit cooperative. Sangham savings make up 25% to 45% of the credit fund with the remainder made up of grants from various government rural assistance

programs and matching grants from DDS brokered international development project funds. As the DDS puts it "it is crucial for local communities to take over certain spheres of autonomies to protect themselves from being trampled over by invisible globalising forces." In the process, the focus of the DDS- Sangham collaboration has shifted from food security and technology transfer to programs addressing food sovereignty, gender justice, environmental sustainability and local peoples' knowledge which are designed through participatory rural assessment (PRA) protocols.

The Sangham network has thereby undertaken several cooperative community projects aimed at securing its members' autonomy. In response to the World Bank's successful attack against the Indian PDS, the Sangham women organized their own Alternative Public Distribution System (APDS), which is based on their locally administered Community Grain Funds. It involves over three thousand women in fifty villages who produce more than a million kilograms of extra sorghum annually and thus are able to distribute more than a thousand extra meals per member family a year. This surplus storage of food serves the critical food needs of the poorest and most destitute during lean times of crisis or emergency, especially in droughts. The Community Grain Funds are managed by councils in each Sangham village, made up five women elected by the village who administer each village's Grain Fund account. Family entitlements to the Community Grain Fund are determined through a public audit also designed and managed by each Sangham. Their autonomous media production unit, the Community Media Trust, has made videos which explain how this program works and advertise its availability. A key point APDS members emphatically made to me is that they have demonstrated, through their APDS, that once poor farmers are in control of their agriculture and their natural resources, "with a bit of help and access to financial resources," they "do not have to seek out Genetically Modified crops or multinationals to feed [them]." This marketing cooperative thus enables the women to produce for local needs, not for global markets, and this is crucial for bolstering local food security. But it also allows nutritionally dense, environmentally better adapted varieties of millets, peas and sorghum to be brought back into cultivation.

The Sangham network also manages several forest commons of over a thousand acres, which they have regenerated near their villages. Furthermore, in thirty villages they maintain medicinal commons where over sixty different species of medicinal plants are conserved. Another key autonomy struggle against biopiracy and seed monopoly has led to their invention of the Agro-biodiversity Register and the establishment of Community Gene Funds in sixty villages where more than eighty species of cultivars have been retrieved from extinction and conserved as collective public property. Designed by themselves for themselves and other non-literate farmers, the Agro-biodiversity Register has been adopted into the Indian National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

The Sangham network also runs several *balwadis* (daycares) and night-schools for older children, a women's legal defence committee, and a women's shelter, while the DDS maintains a special school for working children and an agro-sciences research institute (Krishi Vigyan Kendra) where agricultural scientists, enviromentalists and farmers collaborate on participatory agricultural research on biodiversity conservation and organic farming. The Sangham network is thus equally an agricultural cooperative and a knowledge cooperative. They also operate a mobile market or consumer cooperative as well as a restaurant in Zaheerabad which features a cuisine based on the women's produce.

One particularly striking feature of this Sangham network is its many links with environmental and national, regional and international global social justice networks. These include the Organic Farming Association of India, the Southern Alliance Against Genetic Engineering, South Asian Network For Food, Ecology and Culture (SANFEC), South Against Genetic Engineering (SAGE), Biodiversity Action for Sustainable Agriculture (BASA-Asia), as well as local farmers unions and women's "self-help" associations. In this, we find traces of the peculiar twist the Indian national liberation movement gave to Fanon's[20] famous primal scene in which the student from the city escapes to the countryside and finds shelter and political enlightenment in the hospitality of the subaltern, and a revolutionary decolonization process thus comes into being. The agronomists, biologists, social scientists, journalists, environmentalists, policymakers, and activists from urban India and beyond who attend the DDS's consultations, hearings, workshops, and public fora all walk paths historically laid down by both the Gandhian and Communist mass movements' tireless organizing work among the rural poor. Faced with the neoliberal offensive as well as assertive Dalit self-organization from the 1980s on, both movements have been forced to rethink their politics from first premises and the DDS is one conjunctural experiment in this critical process. Through this organizing work, the Sangham network has succeeded in opening a site of struggle within the Indian state's managerial complex for agriculture. The risk of cooptation involved then makes the Sangham network all that more crucial to the women's struggles. For the Sangham network, on the other hand, has not only raised the status of the women who belong to it and enabled them to assume many kinds of leadership roles in their villages, but their pedagogic and recruitment efforts--especially through their organization of an annual biodiversity *jathara*--have extended these women's influence throughout a wider class formation. Following developments in Dalit political mobilization nationally, the Sangham network has become more *bahujan*[21] in character by forging solidarities with a broader class of poor women including Muslims, Gollas (a cattle breeder caste), Tenugus (marginal peasants and fisher-folk), Mangalis (a caste of barbers), and Sakalis (a caste of washers). In all these respects, the women have been engaged in a veritable biopolitical "class struggle through the networks," as the counter-

globalization theorists Hardt & Negri (2000) would come to call it, against the further subsumption of their agriculture under monopolies managed by the multinational agribusinesses and the leverage these multinationals have with the Indian state.

And yet for all the Sangham network's strenuous efforts and emphatic assertions regarding autonomy, it must be said that the network and their projects remains very dependent on development funding. While I do not doubt that their credit and marketing cooperative is an achievement and enables them to rent land and produce surpluses for their Community Grain Fund, many of their other projects seem to remain quite dependent on development donors, as was clearly apparent recently when their *balwadies* almost closed when a funding agency pulled out and another had to be found. It seems to me that the Sanghams of Medak remain a long way away from their own ideal of autonomy. Admittedly, however, not many cooperatives strive for such a wide range of autonomies. Moreover, the gains in food security, in biodiversity, advances in agro-environmental knowledge and practice, as well as the benefits of rural employment itself cannot be easily expressed on a balance sheet. Nevertheless, the question of whether they will ever be able to reach their own ideals is an important one not only for them but also for more general theoretical lessons we may be able to learn from their cooperative experiment. However, rather than trying to hastily pass judgment on whether their experiment in autonomy will be able to extricate itself from this contradiction, or second guess whether this experiment will succeed or fail, I think it is more useful to take the Sangham strategy as a limit case--a kind of degree zero of the cooperative strategy, a cooperative that is poised on the very threshold of its cooperative self-actualization but for that reason still linked to the wider world and its institutions, as all cooperatives inevitably are--in order to deepen our theoretical understanding of the limits within which the new cooperativism must perforce operate. It is to these considerations that I now turn.

Limit lessons

Cooperatives and cooperative movements have re-appeared persistently ever since the Industrial Revolution because they emerge out of and seek to displace several key contradictions of capitalist social reproduction. In this regard, cooperative movements in India and elsewhere can and have been understood as an example of what Polanyi called "the principle of social protection" said to assert itself in the face of attempts to reorganize social life under the "stark utopia" of the market mechanism.[22] But for this very reason, cooperatives are crucial sites of re-politicization and transformative struggle, as well. Consequently, two key questions have been posed with regard to cooperative strategy time and again: How can a cooperative mode of production be sustainable? How can cooperatives traverse the passage from

enclave to delinking and autonomy? Much of the critical and theoretical literature addressing these questions has been organized around the issue of the failure of cooperatives, either to endure or reproduce themselves down generations or to prevent themselves from becoming much like other "capitalist" enterprises, i.e., "cooperatives of shareholders."[23] Or else discussions of the political possibilities of the cooperative strategy have returned time and again to late nineteenth and early twentieth century debates between the cooperative and socialist movements and have more or less remained within the binary oppositions of those debates.[24] While both sets of discussions are crucially important and have generated key insights, they also have their limitations. I take my point of departure here from two specific limitations of such accounts: These have either explicitly or implicitly limited themselves to the nation-state as their "unit of analysis" rather than the global scale of historical capitalism itself.[25] They have also not paid sufficient attention to how the historical path to dependency of the cooperative strategy resituates cooperatives among a multiplicity of immanent contradictions. Given the urgency of these historically long-standing questions in the present conjuncture, marked as it is by the proliferation of crises of global capitalism,[26] the theoretical task of rendering these questions more precise and appropriate for the current conjuncture is surely a worthwhile task. The discussion below will seek to move us along in this direction.

One of the key contradictions of capitalist social reproduction that producers' cooperatives seek to keep at bay, of course, consists of the necessity for wage dependents to compete with each other in the labour market and yet cooperate with other wage dependents in the production process itself. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of our conjuncture in which multinational corporations have "ruled the world"[27] is the spread and intensification of tacit anonymous cooperation wherein people cooperate with others they will never know nor ever meet. This tacit and anonymous cooperation now takes place through a complex multiplicity of mediations, ranging from the organization of a world-wide division of labour (and therefore of the situations of class struggle on a world scale), politics at the level of nation-states, right through to the politics of re-framing cultural narratives of all kinds. Nonetheless, it is this "globalization" of tacit and anonymous cooperation that connects the cooperative strategy to the Utopian exclamation "another world IS possible." For what else is a revolutionary situation but one of generalized crisis--economic, political, cultural, social, personal crisis--in which people refuse to cooperate with all existing forms of leadership and command and must therefore claim back and redirect all the movements of mediation which makes their social reproduction possible? In that case, it could furthermore be said that the capacity to organize and keep viable producers' and other cooperatives is crucially necessary in such a situation of proliferating social crises if that situation is not to be manipulated into racist-sexist violence of the weak against the weaker. Here, the Sanghams of

Medak have a few things to teach us, especially about the place of ideology and cultural production in the cooperative strategy, to which I will return below.

But first let us consider two further aspects of the Dalit women's situation and their struggles. The very fact that the Sangham women's struggle is at once a feminist struggle, an environmental struggle, an anti-casteist struggle as well as a struggle over the conditions and means of production brings into sharp focus crucial features of the condition of wage dependency itself. First of all, we are reminded that underpinning Marx's "quantitative" theory of exploitation --the expropriation of surplus value via some quantity of non-remunerated expenditure of labour power--is his deeper insight into the historical emergence of capitalism, which we could call his "qualitative theory of exploitation." For a wage dependent is a wage dependent insofar as she has no other viable productive access to nature and is therefore compelled to sell her labour power for a wage; the wage now mediates her productive access to both nature and the fruits of social cooperation. What is crucial here, as Marx pointedly underscores, is the class violence mobilized now over hundreds of years through which communities have been and continue to be "separated" from their productive access to nature; whether through enclosures, ecological destruction, forced relocation or war. The commodification of labour power presupposes this violent history of proletarianization, of the creation of wage dependency.[28] But this violence includes separation from all kinds of technologies as well, their privatization, confiscation, destruction, suppression, obsolescence etc. Indeed, since technology is nothing other than nature embodied by human history, since technology never stops following the laws of nature, this separation too is a separation from a community's erstwhile productive access to nature.[29] The Sangham women's struggle is directed precisely against both aspects of this accumulated violence: They seek autonomy from their fate as migrant labour in construction, domestic service, piece-work in petty commodity production of all kinds and prostitution. But, as we have seen, they also seek autonomy from agricultural deskilling and from the real subsumption of their agriculture by multinational agribusiness. Here, their fundamental problem of landlessness, we have also noted, is directly conditioned by patriarchal inheritance laws and norms and by caste discrimination. One key implication of their situation of struggle then is that it is far too simplistic to understand the links between exploitation and various modes of domination as the so-called "intersection" of variables of gender, race and class; since these are not "variables" at all but the historical contents of a specific, social situation of political struggle. For this reason, neither does it seem to me helpful to pose the problem as a question of "class and its others." The point of making analytic distinctions between exploitation and other kinds of domination is that we are then better able to understand their tactical supplementations and strategic mediations; how in some given situation of struggle, each lends to another some kind of ready-to-hand accumulated

violence. To want, as has been argued, "to open up their relations to the contingencies of theory"[30] seems in any case to lead only to, well, precisely that, the arbitrariness of mystification.

Moreover, anthropologists and historical sociologists have long pointed out that any social formation is constituted out of many articulated modes of social reproduction.[31] The global rise of capitalism over several centuries is actually the consolidation of its position, in Althusser's terms, as the dominant mode of production among many others. There are two important insights to be drawn from an understanding of what Wallerstein thus calls "historical capitalism." First, the historical formation of free wage-labour has never taken place without its articulation with the value production of unfree and non-waged labour.[32] The historical conditions of possibility of free wage labour has been its linkage in a circuit of value with both unfree and unwaged labour in the various world-spanning imperial systems of accumulation from the fifteenth century right through to the present. Secondly, the politically relevant and socially actual institutional form of wage labour, as many social scientists have pointed out, is the household, which include children, the elderly, extended kin, etc.[33] Considered historically, and over the intergenerational span of its reproduction, wages make up only one component of values that enables the social reproduction of labour power in its actual situation in the household. The survival or even well-being of households have always depended on many different kinds of modes of production of use-values serving historically determinate needs: modes of production conserved as traditional practices, subsistence production, collective and cooperative modes of production, those incorporating forms of community reciprocity and barter as well as through state enterprises. All of these modes of production are crucial to intergenerational reproduction of the household even where the wage input is relatively large in relation to the total, but especially so where the wage ratio is relatively low.

The accumulation of capital, then, has long involved the geopolitical articulation of various modes of production such that the production of historical and singular use-values can be appropriated as exchange value through commodification and the wage does not anywhere have to cover the full cost of the social reproduction of labour power. The circuit of expanded reproduction of capital has always had this moebius strip like "outside-in" character wherein capital accumulation depends both on its historical path dependency and on the heterogenous forms of social life emerging from the various paths of the past for the synchronic supplementation of surplus value that makes accumulation possible.[34] The contemporary persistence of this outside-in structure of the circuit of value and the accumulated violence on which this structure rests is one reason why I do not think Hardt & Negri's claim "Empire has no outside"[35] is very helpful. But this also why restricting theoretical attention only to the redistribution of surplus labour[36] will generate a North-

centered populist politics since it fails to grasp the global scale and historical duration of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession."[37]

These theoretical considerations, however, enable us to return to another aspect of the Dalit women's struggle to which we must now briefly attend, which also, on the one hand, sheds light on the crucial question of the relationship between the cooperative strategy and class struggle and, on the other, the "success/failure" problem regarding cooperatives. At the core of the Sangham strategy we saw was their formation of a credit and marketing cooperative, the Deccan Development Mutually Aided Credit Cooperative Society. Through this cooperative, the women hope to resolve two problems faced by small farmers: that of obtaining credit and securing relatively stable prices for their production. Indeed, the exacerbation of this problem and the extreme rural distress of hunger and immiseration that results has been a characteristic feature of neoliberal globalization. As we have already noted, precisely for this reason social movements organizing credit cooperatives have seen a resurgence in recent decades (as they did in the 1930s & 40s), including the formation of the Cooperative Development Foundation and the MACs movement in Andhra Pradesh specifically.[38]

Now the problem of accessing credit has two sides: the problem of obtaining adequate credit and that of obtaining affordable credit.[39] But both problems are connected to the women's dispossession of collateral, which in this instance stems from their landlessness. From the women's point of view, however, their vulnerability to the agribusiness contract farming complex results from the force of an absolute tautology: they are landless because they are women; they are dalit women because they are landless…so they have no collateral. But presupposed in this tautology is the persistence of the core-periphery relationship of domination. Those who question the contemporary pertinence of core-periphery inequality usually make the mistake of understanding core and periphery to be two boxes into which you can sort different nation-states. But core-periphery names a relation, even a spatial relation, though one that is a social and political relation, too. It is mediated by geographical space but not identical with it. Given the spatial transformations widely identified with globalization (e.g., the new capital flows, the economic proceessing zones (EPZs), global cities, etc.), it may now be more useful to designate the persistence of the same core-periphery geopolitical system of domination through wholly new kinds of postmodern space as the duration of a difference between overdevelopment and underdevelopment. In any case, it is precisely this difference that we see at work in this instance when these women were unable to access adequate and affordable credit just at the time when cheap credit had been abundantly available to the world's high financiers and to North American consumers. The credit that the global economy did make available to these women and others in similar situations came in the form of

either contract farming for agribusiness or transnational banks tapping microcredit networks. But this credit then comes at the price of losing all control over the production process of their agriculture (i.e., real subsumption) and the high risks of crop failure, market failure, and debt servitude to local intermediary moneylenders and transnationalized financial institutions.[40] Their credit and marketing cooperative not only addresses this issue of credit supply and stable prices but also liberates them to grow crops their families and communities can themselves eat rather than cash crops for the global market. In this regard, the cooperative shores up their food security and serves as a crucial survival strategy. The very fact that exploitation by merchant-money lenders (and now by the agribusiness contract farming system) is both a historically long-standing vulnerability and one that is common to communities of small farmers and peasants throughout the periphery points precisely to the endurance of a core-periphery relationship of domination as a difference between the overdevelopment and underdevelopment of global capitalism. But their very struggle against the trap of debt servitude is also what connects them to struggles of the poor around the world. The very commonality of struggles is what reterritorializes particular struggles into a utopian form of universality, as the form taken by the class struggles of our times.

If we understand the cooperative strategy to be immanent to a globally reterritorialized class struggle and not its displacement, then we are able to clarify our understanding of the success and failure of producers' cooperatives. One line of criticism directed at cooperative movements has argued that when cooperatives succeed, they fail.[41] That is to say that when cooperatives are viable and accumulate capital they eventually become more or less like any other capitalist business enterprise. Sooner or later they begin to pursue the expansion and diversification of their activities through the employment of wage labour instead of admitting more members. Indeed, Mondragon itself provides a paradigmatic case of a successful producers' cooperative crossing the barricade.[42] Is the cooperative strategy then fated to be accommodationist? As Mondragon and other examples testify, the danger of co-optation is a real one. Moreover, the question of why some cooperatives succeed and others fail is a crucially important one. But considering these two limit cases, Mondragon and the Sanghams of Medak together enables us to usefully alter our perspective on this question itself.

One way to put the issue is to note that just as the crises of the capitalist mode of social reproduction result from its very successes, so the very successes of the cooperative strategy seeds its own crises. What is needed then is an approach to the question of success and failure that studies a given cooperative strategy in relation to the fullest range of contradictions in which it is embedded, including those which derive from the global division of labour and class struggle on a world scale. Empirical case studies of cooperatives demonstrate that their

success or failure is contingent upon a wide range of contextual factors. In the case of failure, either state policies are hostile to cooperatives or there is bureaucratic interference resulting in market failure or credit problems and the like. In other cases, there is ideological drift or disillusionment; poor decision-making, confusion, free-riders and so on. Whereas in the case of cooperatives that have endured, these factors have been favourable.[43]

Here we need to remember that the real-world context of any actually existing cooperative is not only the regional or national context but always includes the world context, as well. As a memory aid, let me sketch a quick napkin diagram of this otherwise unrepresentable totality. This context is both deeply and finely hierarchical and presupposes the historical accumulation of violence on which the capitalist mode of social reproduction rests. First of all, let us consider the contradictions and conflicts between proprietors of capital and wage labour. The reasons why so many have been tempted to think that the era of class struggles is over are several: The postmodern production of space through which global assembly lines and supply chains have spread around the world from the late 1970s on have introduced the mediations of a complex hierarchy of state bodies, from local authorities to national agencies as well as the proliferation of bodies that seem both governmental but also somehow beyond the purview of the state such as transnational NGOs, the World Bank and the IMF, trade and professional associations, the shadow banking sector, etc. Each of these new layers of technocratic management, reform, and regulation generates its own institutional politics through which class interests are absorbed and redirected.[44] Secondly, the number, kind, and size of business enterprises have greatly expanded, diversified, and multiplied with the giant multinational corporations operating in what Fernand Braudel[45] called the commanding heights of “anti-market” monopolies and “monopsonies.”[46] Many of those stratospheric Braudelian spaces are protected by a fortress that were until recently the G-7 states (now that this has become the G-20 shows that there is considerable conflict and competition among the world’s transnational ruling classes). Underneath this stratosphere, however, is a wide range of national and local scale productive enterprises, firms, suppliers, and contractors operating with organizational forms of great social and cultural diversity, many in intensively competitive markets, especially toward the bottom reaches of the global division of labour. Capital accumulation in the Braudelian monopoly-monopsony “anti-market” stratosphere of this hierarchy is far greater in scale than in any other location in the vaster body of this hierarchy. Its current geopolitical design is such that a penny saved anywhere in the circuit of value running through it will tend to trickle up sooner or later to those monopoly-monopsony spaces.[47] But the social spaces of wage dependent households has also vastly increased over the last several decades. These spaces are also deeply stratified and finely segmented by the differences making up the division of labour and by differences of identity of all kinds.

Considered in light of this sketch of global stratification, we see the practice of cooperatives hiring wage workers instead of admitting members is not nearly so simple to assess. Firstly, all productive enterprises which successfully accumulate, whether capitalist or cooperative, participate in the political and economic system of exploitation through the global circuit of value; though I suppose there is something to be said about not doing it directly yourself. Secondly, most cases of upward mobility through the global hierarchy cuts across a small number of proximate segments of an otherwise extensive range of inequalities, unless it involves off-shoring production from the core to the periphery as in the case of Mondragon's operations in Latin America. Moreover, as in, let us say, the case of the differences between wage workers in Canada and the EPZs in Malaysia, the effective political and social rights connected to a wage can be as important or more so than one's legal economic status as either wage-earner or proprietor.

The struggles of the women of the Sanghams of Medak make one thing clear, however. The most important aspect defining the success or failure of the Sangham strategy is its relationship to the broad range of global social movements through which class struggle is carried out from below in our times. I was told that one major problem the Sanghams were facing was that young people were leaving for the cities, a common problem faced by many rural agricultural cooperatives around the world. As a survival strategy for the very desperate and poor, the Sanghams are no doubt a success. But it is equally obvious that many Sangham youth also perceive them to be locked into limits the strategy cannot transcend. Whether wage dependants in the cities are not also locked into similar limits is another issue. Indeed they are. Which path the youth will be better off choosing depends to a large extent on the victories and defeats of the global social justice movements both on the subcontinent and around the world. In light of this, the Sanghams' insistent and emphatic ideological affirmation of egalitarianism and its organizational efforts to minimize distinctions of social status is especially significant. This ideological commitment derives from their participation in the subcontinent's *dalitbahujan* movement, while their autonomous media production enables them to actively participate in global social justice movements as well.[48]

The Sangham's strategy suggests that the most important questions we should ask about the new cooperativism are the following: How far do they pursue their egalitarian axiom? What kinds of utopian cultural production can they invent?

Endnotes

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[2] **Sourayan Mookerjea**'s research addresses contradictions of globalization, migration, urbanization, subaltern social movements, popular culture and class politics. Recent publications include *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, co-edited with Dr. I. Szeman and G. Faurschou, (Duke University Press, 2009).
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