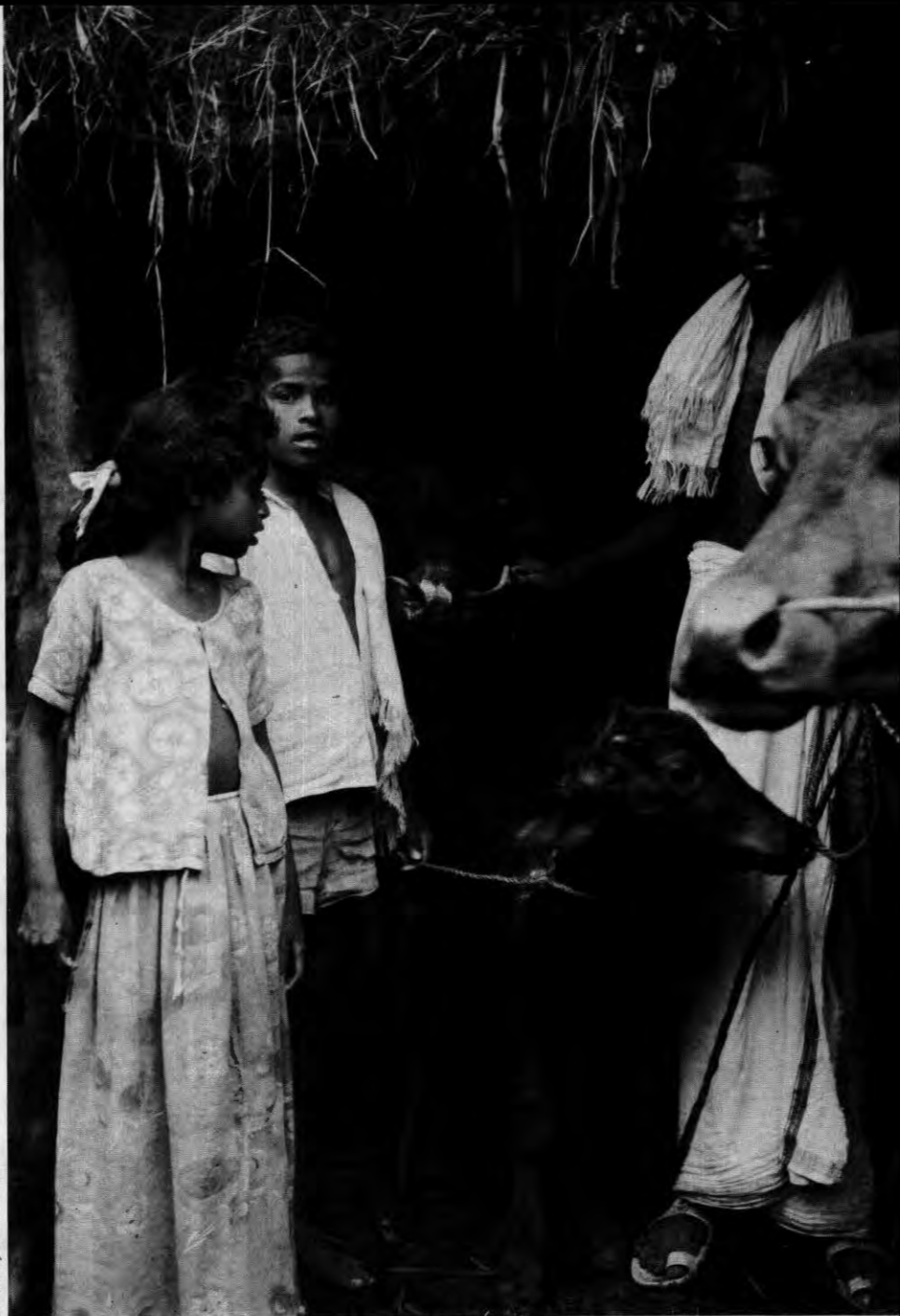


# Right Sharing in India

by Elizabeth Moen

Photos by Tom Moen



Last year Tom Moen and I spent nine months in Asia and visited as many Quaker-related projects as we could. One of our most memorable experiences was our four-day visit to the small town of T. Kallupatti in the state of Tamil Nadu, southern India. Here the Friends World Committee for Consultation's Right Sharing project has provided a series of small grants to the People's Service Society for their water buffalo dairy project.

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It is hard to decide how to tell about our experiences there: the warmth, generosity, and hospitality; the inspiration of a person who truly lives by Gandhian/Quaker principles; the excitement of being the honored guests at a function which drew more than 5,000 people from the town and surrounding villages; walking through ankle-deep mud to visit some of the poorest people in the world; seeing the great pride and dignity the ownership of one water buffalo has given some of these people.

It was all of this and more. Deep inside we were changed.

T. Gopal has lived in T. Kallupatti all

of his life. At the local Gandhian ashram he received the learn-by-doing education prescribed by Gandhi, and for many years he worked for this organization. He married and had six daughters and six stillborn sons. He deeply mourns the loss of those sons, but his daughters have not been neglected. Independent and outspoken, they all go to school: the eldest is in law school, the next is working toward a master's degree in peace studies, and the third has finished her first year of college. Each declares she will not marry until she is well established in the business of helping the poor and downtrodden.

Gopal, his wife, six daughters, and invalid mother live, by T. Kallupatti standards, comfortably. They rent a concrete house for \$12 a month. The house has two small rooms, an indoor kitchen, a cubicle for taking a bucket bath, a semi-enclosed porch, and a few light bulbs. As in most homes in India, there is no water tap, toilet, or latrine. There are only a few pieces of furniture; most of the family sits, eats, sleeps, and studies on the concrete floor.

Gopal is deeply religious, and like many Hindus, he appreciates and integrates other spiritual revelations into his faith. He knows how much Gandhi was influenced by Quakerism, and he lives by that Light. A few years ago Gopal started the People's Service Society, which is dedicated to "the upliftment of the poor" through education, community organization, and the initiation of self-help projects. Gopal has dedicated his life to this work; his only income is what people give directly to him and the small sums he earns from the occasional export of textiles to people who have visited the project. He is aided by other middle-class members of the community, such as M. Kaliraj, who owns a small shop with an inventory of less than a dozen eggs, a few magazines, and many raffle tickets.

Let me put \$12 a month in perspective. Tamil Nadu is one of the more affluent states in India; however, the wealth (as elsewhere) is not equitably distributed. Most of the people are landless farm laborers, whose work is irregular and usually available for only 150 days a year. In 1984 the wage for a full day's work was from eight to ten rupees for men and from four to five rupees for women. A rupee was worth ten U.S. cents. The rest of the time the people struggle to get something to eat and to avoid having to go to the moneylender. Food is not cheap in India, although it may seem so to us. Rice is subsidized, but for many it is not cheap enough. Rice on the market costs about four and a half rupees per kilogram, which is about half the price of rice in the United States. Most of the people near T. Kallupatti do not eat fruit, vegetables, meat, or the traditional rice dishes but instead subsist on porridge made from millet or whatever is cheapest. And few families can avoid the moneylender, who may charge as much as one percent a day.

Even in T. Kallupatti there is a poverty line—a household income of 60 rupees a month, or \$72 a year. Those who earn less than this are the families the People's Service Society serves. In 1980 the society began its first major project with a grant of \$2,650 from the FWCC's Right Sharing project. This money was used to establish a revolving no-interest loan to enable poor households to purchase female water buffaloes. By 1984 Right Sharing had contributed a total of \$13,530 to the fund, which has enabled the purchase of 91 buffaloes, and which, as the loans are paid back over five years, will continuously be loaned out for the purchase of more buffaloes.

The People's Service Society teaches the care of water buffaloes, oversees the repayment of loans (there have been no defaults), and has also organized the collection and marketing of the milk, which provides additional jobs. Each day the family milks its buffalo, keeping part of the milk and selling the rest to the dairy. The proceeds are used to repay the loan, and buy food for the buffalo, and a few rupees are profit. It doesn't sound like much money, but by owning a buffalo, a family can earn an average of \$30 a year more than can be earned by seasonal labor, and the two combined can make a big difference. Later, when the loan has been repaid, the family can keep more of the milk or more of the income from its sale. Equal-

ly important, the buffaloes provide dung, which in turn provides critically needed fuel for cooking, fertilizer for those who have a bit of land, and additional income if it is sold. Also, household members are employed in tending, milking, and gathering food for the buffalo.

Although we were not official representatives of the FWCC we were treated as if we ourselves had been great benefactors to the community. The gratitude and esteem were to be conveyed to the FWCC and Quakers in the United States. On one day we visited each of the buffaloes in T. Kallupatti, and on another we pedaled three kilometers to visit the buffaloes in the village of Vannivelampatti. Here we were greeted by a large crowd and given lovely flower wreaths in welcome.

Like most Indians, the villagers live in tiny mud huts. The thatch roofs, dilapidated and leaky, cannot be replaced because even coconut palm fronds and other thatching materials must be purchased. Although the buffaloes are sturdy, reliable animals, they cannot stand much direct sunlight. There are few trees, so buffalo are kept close to the huts to catch whatever shade they can from wall and roof. This makes living conditions even more unsanitary. The dirt floors are little more than extensions of the mud-dung muck outside caused by a post-monsoon storm. The huts are nearly empty except for a few





cooking pots, a water jar, perhaps a few clothes.

Many of the women who once owned culturally required gold jewelry now have only holes in their ears and noses. They have had to sell or hock their only form of personal security. Their arms are bereft of even cheap plastic bangles, and most wear a yellow string instead of the gold necklace, which in south India proclaims that you are a married woman and by that offers some protection. Some wear only a ragged sari—no blouse and no petticoat—in a necessary violation of modesty norms.

The children display all the signs of malnutrition and infestation—retardation, skinny arms and legs, bloated stomach, reddish and frizzled hair, open sores, dysentery. They tumbled after us like puppies and roared with laughter when I, in my long skirt, tried to get on a men's bike.

This is known as a Communist village; some of the men carry red towels over their shoulders and some huts have a hammer and sickle painted on the side. When asked what it means to be a Communist they say they do not know what communism is, but they do know that when they were being harassed by the police, only the Communists came to their aid. And so they vote for Communist party candidates in elections.

The villagers surrounded us, curious and friendly, but with that look we experienced so many times in India, a look

of desperation that says, yes, we greet you as friends but we know you are rich and we know you could help us. They resisted saying the words; they resisted holding out their hands; they prevented the children from begging; and we were grateful.

The People's Service Society's real aim is empowerment. You can see it when a family brings its buffalo out for a picture, and you know it is developing as family members learn to keep accounts and plan for the time when their buffalo produces more buffaloes. Already these families are forming cooperatives to collect and sell their milk, and five buffalo owners attend meetings of the society's board of directors. Gopal believes projects such as this one increase democracy in India, because very poor people are afraid to exert their rights.

But there are still problems, such as keeping the buffaloes alive during the hot, dry season. Gopal figures a shed with a roof would cost about \$50, much more than any of these families can afford.

There are also plans. The success of the FWCC-sponsored loan program has encouraged Indian banks to work with the People's Service Society. Three banks will loan 200 families \$300 each to purchase water buffaloes if the society can contribute \$5,000. A Danish organization will give 40 percent of the funds needed for a large poultry project

if the society can get a bank loan of \$35,000 (which it has) plus raise an additional \$4,900 in donations and provide the land and a building, which will cost \$5,100. The society plans to also participate in a federally funded adult literacy program, and it hopes to establish a tree-planting program, day care centers, and a goat project.

From the perspective of U.S. citizens, these are not large sums of money. But in India, \$15,000 for the buffalo and poultry projects will mean self-sufficiency for hundreds of desperately poor families.

On our last night in T. Kallupatti we were presented with a proclamation written by Gopal. It was illustrated in color by one of the villagers and framed by another:

We the people of T. Kallupatti, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu, are very happy to receive you, the apostles of Right Sharing of World Resources of Friends World Committee for Consultation of U.S.A.

**PRODIGIOUS AND GIFTED COUPLE OF BOULDER FRIENDS MEETING, COLORADO.**

We wholeheartedly appreciate both of you for the philanthropic deeds, kindness, and sympathy shown toward our people. Your yeoman service is praiseworthy and should be written in the annals of human life.

**WE ARE PLENTY OF PEOPLE TO GREET YOU AND YOUR MISSION.**

Indeed that the policy of Right Sharing of World Resources of Friends World Committee for Consultation is the panacea for all the ills of the developing countries. Your people are setting an example for the same. Your profound LOVE has united with us. We believe that wherever the human spirit strives to push back the sphere of darkness and to widen the area of light, wherever people sacrifice the immediate interests of the one alone for the diviner aims of the many together, there God is present, in that search for the better and more inclusive world that is to be. The kingdoms we build for love's sake, our dedication to the good of the whole, our passions and agonizing struggle for LIGHT and TRUTH and LIFE are ways of touching the hem of the garment of God.

We humbly pray to the God to strengthen our friendship in the years to come. We pray the Almighty to shower all His Blessings upon you, our friends, and your great country.

What else is there to say?