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Charaka Women's Multipurpose Cooperative Society¹

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1. Background

We have been patrons of the Desi Apparel Stores at South End Circle in Bangalore, where we have been getting our handloom jubbas (*kurtas*) and other ready-to-wear cotton and handloom garments at very reasonable prices. We came to know that the main production unit for Desi is a rural women's cooperative society called Charaka, based in the village of Heggodu in Shivamogga district of Karnataka. Charaka, we were told, was an initiative of the Kannada playwright and author Prasanna. The question of what makes successful cooperatives tick had always intrigued us and also wanting to know more about the jubbas that we liked wearing, we gathered information about Charaka and reached Heggodu for the first time in April 2009.

The first impression of Charaka was very soothing to our jaded, urban eyes. Rustic, red mud and brick structures with artistic drawing on panels (which we later came to know was a folk-art called *hase-kale*), all around a huge banyan tree with chirpy young women ambling purposefully across the place. Since that day, we have been visiting Charaka often, and we have been drawn to the spirit of Charaka and the lively women who own and run that Institution.

Understanding the story behind Charaka and its women requires us to understand the motivations of Prasanna and many of its founder members, some of whom are still with Charaka. As much as Charaka is a rural producer cooperative owned and managed by women, it is also a vision of its founder's indefatigable commitment to his political ideology, his views on the Indian village, the handloom sector, the powerloom, and environmental sustainability.

This is an account of the conversations we have had with the women and men involved with Charaka. It took us along several paths – the founder's dream (or *fancy* as he puts it), the perceptions of the senior members of the changes in Charaka as they find it growing, the role of the younger elected members in this cooperative, the grooming of leaders and the role of Charaka as a driver of change in the lives of the women working there. They expressed their pride in the organisation, their concerns and fears about its growth and their vision for its future. In the one year that we were involved in these conversations, Charaka was also caught in the downturn that affected the garment industry in general – so members for the first time had to explicitly deal with issues of growth, quality, and find their own responses to the 'vagaries' of urban markets.

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For a Multipurpose Cooperative society that engages in almost all processes that go into making of a handloom jubba - the jubba is at the center of its origin. They wanted the jubba to survive because the jubba, as they very simply put it, represents our culture. From the beginning therefore, Charaka was very clear about its product and it recognised the potential of this product to provide economic opportunities to the people of Heggodu. We have heard Prasanna often quoting the Buddha, "Unless somebody is fed, don't teach him dharma". The moorings of this origin though, were in myriad other things far, far removed from the jubba – in Ninasam², in Samudaya – a theatre for mass education, in the Kavi-Kavya Literary Trust, in the Balanandana school for children, in the anganwadi teachers' training project being the district of Shivamogga and so on.

After his training at the National School of Drama (NSD), Prasanna came to Karnataka and was involved with the Communist movement. He also helped set up Samadaya, and then came to Heggodu to teach at Ninasam.

He left Ninasam to found the Balanandana School and then the Kavi Kavya Trust. From the close interaction with people that each of these ventures provided, the seeds for Charaka were sowed – a quest for a sustainable livelihood for the rural poor.

2. Charaka and its moorings in Heggodu

Prasanna tells us that he came to Heggodu a highly politicized man. '*A man with biases*' as he puts it. When he came to Heggodu, his communist background did create an impression that he was against brahmins. These were just impressions he says, not that he actually did anything.

He began with the Balanandana School, which was a pre-school for young children. Theatre activists like Safdar Hashmi were brought to train the children of the school. For many years the school functioned quite well. The children were taught various activities; including having them play with mud. All these were attempts to conquer inhibitions and fears in children. The school taught kids how to put waste to use and make creative things out of it.

The Kavi Kavya Trust was also set up at the same time. It was a literary trust where writers and poets were called and discussions were held on various topics. In the beginning activities of the trust were limited to literary activities, local cultural programmes and discussions. The Trust was also bringing out a literary magazine called *Rujuvaatu*. Seminars were also organised in Heggodu – on the local art forms and folk songs (*Hase Kale, Tondi Sampradaya, yaksha gaana, taala maddale, kavya vacahana*). Since it was a Trust, it could

² Ninasam - Ninasam (also spelt as Neenasam) is the short form of Sri Nilakanteshwara NATyaseva SAMgha, an organisation dedicated to the growth of drama, films and publishing. is a cultural organisation located in the village of [Heggodu](#) in [Sagar Taluk](#) of the [Shivamogga district](#) in the state of [Karnataka, India](#). Please see, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninasam>

undertake projects and DPEP (District Primary Education Program) of the Government of Karnataka gave them a project involving the training of the anganwadi teachers in the district of Shivamogga. Three months were spent training the trainers – in creativity and the use of cultural activities to train pre-school children. Theatre persons also participated in the project. A few persons who were trained as part of that project were Prasanna's students. Using the experience of the Balanandana school, training programmes were designed for the anganwadi teachers.

One of Prasanna's early acquaintances, Shamsie, still with Charaka today had a lot to say about the struggle of those early days. Shamsie began as an artiste with Ninasam in Heggodu, and used to act in plays. That is where he first met Prasanna. Shamsie tells us candidly that even as the Trust was being set up, there was opposition from some local right-wing RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak) forces. Prasanna approached Shamsie to work with him for the Kavi Kavya Trust. Shamsie recollects that, a village shed in Heggodu was handed over to the Kavi Kavya Trust for its activities.

Mohan, one of Prasanna's associates from the Samudaya days says that Prasanna used to say,

"Whatever you do, whatever battles you fight, people need to have a means of livelihood. Mere campaigning and protests will not solve anything. You may be able to give information to people, but beyond that such protests will not achieve anything."

Many members of Charaka today talk of how the scarce livelihood opportunities that Heggodu has. Had it not been for Charaka, the only work they could have done was as agricultural labourers or as domestic workers in the fields or houses of upper caste landlords. This is especially so for women who are often not allowed to travel outside their villages for employment. Prema, one of the Directors of the Society who works in the Dyeing Unit says,

I feel like saying a lot about Charaka. There are a lot of girls here. All of them would have had to go to work in some Brahmins houses or some such work. It was not possible to go for such work at all. Education levels are also quite low here, they study till 10th and that is the end. This area is like that, children get spoiled [do not develop].

Soon after Charaka was born - in the same village shed given to the Kavi Kavya Trust. They started with tailoring. Mohan recollects that there were just two sewing machines when it began. The building was an old one, with just mud and stones.

According to Prasanna, Charaka, in a sense was a fancy of his. It arose from his selfish need as an artist to have an access to the world of craftsmen. This link with "crafts" fed his need as an artist. At the same time, working with carftpersons, who are lower in the social order, kept him in touch with the grassroots.

Charaka was also in some ways, a response to the ecological degradation in Heggodu due rampant deforestation and agricultural degradation of the land. According to Prasanna, the poor and the landless needed an alternative to agriculture that was ecologically sustainable.

This agrarian crisis is a pathetic situation for the villagers – and they do not even know how to handle it. Their own brother is earning 2 lakhs per month in Bangalore and the elder or the younger brother here is running a supari plantation and cannot make both ends meet!

Mohan recalls how the trees in Heggodu were in some ways responsible for the formation of Charaka.

One day as we were walking down the road from where our unit is now located, we could see the trees, you know there are trees there, he (Prasanna) looked at the tree and said, 'See how this tree stands today, in a few years it will be destroyed, people will build fences, nature herself will be destroyed.' And then still thinking of the tree, and looking at the building next to it, 'Come let us see if we can do anything' That is all that he said that day. And then he started formulating this, building this up. You can say that that tree was the thing that gave us the energy/force (shakti).

According to Prasanna, the existing social hierarchies in a village make it most difficult for institutions like cooperatives to be initiated and sustained in the villages, the very place where they are most needed. He says that within no time you will have to end up fighting those hierarchies.

Every institution that you build in the village, after a while – you will have to fight the hierarchy or succumb to it. The social hierarchy does not let you live in peace. It challenges you.

Shamsie recollects that opposition from the local people was tremendous initially, because Prasanna was perceived as an outsider. It became quite a big revolution at that time (*kranti*). Shamsie says that at that time around 30-35 women were working with them - Bhagirathi, Bhagyamma and others. Prasanna was very sure that only if he could get their support would he continue, otherwise it will be stopped. There were two groups – those opposing it and those in support of it. Those supporting it came out on to the streets expressing their solidarity. Prasanna even went on a hunger strike for a few days. It was still under the aegis of Kavi Kavya. The assets also belonged to the trust. Prasanna then mooted the idea of forming a society of women.

Mohan testifies that it has been a real struggle to ensure the survival of Charaka. According to him,

So many people tried to kill it. They said they will not get people to work in our fields, that is why they wanted Charaka to stop. We had to struggle to overcome such resistance. Today it has grown so much. Even today, I feel if it were not for Prasanna's continuing effort, it will be difficult.

3. The village and the city

For any rural enterprise, getting to know the village is important. The unchanging nature of the Indian village is often contrasted to its cities and according to Prasanna,

These are two completely different worlds – the city and the village. The production process of the city is not just different, but opposite of the production process in the village. The village is culture bound, where as the city is production bound, target bound. This is such a huge difference and we tend to overlook this difference and that is what causes problems.

He tells us that fundamentally he does not believe that the Indian village should change. He does believe that the village has become rotten in some aspects and they should change – the social aspects, the caste system – the various hierarchies – between men and women, between the poor and rich, upper caste and the lower caste. And then if there is something that needs to be done to a village, it should be made a little more flexible than it normally is.

I don't mean mobility in terms of the city, but mobility in terms what would have happened in the best of times in history. People wrote great literature, and things got across, great ideas spread. In India, there is a certain culture which spread all across throughout the country. How did that happen? How did our folk theatre be the same, essentially the same, between Nagaland and Karnataka and Kashmir to Kanyakumari? Such mobility is necessary. Beyond that, in a very profound sense, there is no need to change.

According to him, trying to make the village like the city is a disastrous experiment. Because the city is sustained by an unequal system, where a privileged few enjoy huge benefits and the rest have to support them. If we think that democracy is trying to spread this privilege to all, then ecologically it will be disastrous. This is a crisis that according to him, we have still not resolved.

Charaka's belief in making the "village" the center-piece of economic activity has made it open several units in the nearby villages around Heggodu. If people are interested in working, Charaka is making arrangements for it wherever they are, by placing looms close to their place of stay. People can work from their villages. In villages in and around Heggodu, there are six such units now. That has been done based on people's convenience, as it is not possible for everyone to travel to Heggodu for work.

Rudranna is a tailor who has been associated with Charaka since 1999. He is from Hosnagara taluka. In 1994, he migrated to Bangalore (*"like everybody else"*), where he worked with a tailor in Bommanhalli, and then worked with a denim factory. He had only heard of exploitation of workers in Garment factories – but in Bangalore he was actually able to see it. 75 percent of all workers in the garment factories were women and he saw how they struggled to come to work, despite the appalling working conditions. That's when he realised how desperate people are for a livelihood, and how difficult life can be in a city. He returned to Heggodu and in February 1999, he joined Charaka's tailoring department working part-time as a cutter. In July 1999, he joined the production department as a full-

time employee. For 3 years, he was also a trustee of Desi (Developing Ecologically Sustainable Industry), Bangalore. Desi is the marketing end of Charaka and has shops selling its produce at Bangalore, Sagar and Dharwad. Charaka is thus based in the village but is sustained by the sales to the cities. Prasanna again,

That is because most of trade and commerce is still urban. It is one-sided and it is cash that makes it one-sided. Cash can only be generated in the city. Cash flows out of the village, not into the village. The moment a villager has some aspirations, even the smallest aspirations – for some education, some health – money is needed, and they have no money. Problem is of cash flow going away from the village rather than into the village. One of the aims of Charaka is to correct this imbalance in cash flow. What you should bring from the city is the mind, and what you should take to the city is the culture. If this process is to help both, then it should give what is not available to each.

Mohan also vouches for the support they have received from people in Bangalore. Having worked at Desi in Bangalore, he appreciates the urban customer's concern for Charaka. He has even detected in them a regret at not being able to wear handlooms as much as they would like to and feels that they are trying to change the situation.

However, this rural-urban connect in Prasanna's mind goes beyond the relationship between Charaka and Desi. He talks of this constant 'tug-of-war'

When you develop something like Charaka – you are always tugged between these two extremes – the city and the village. When you go too close to the village – the old culture – you are not being productive and you start losing profits, sustainability of the cooperative becomes a problem. The village is like a tree- taken roots, inflexible; cannot move. It should be a middle path. We are always trying to maintain this balance – trying to get the mind from the city, and give the culture back to the city. We do not know whether we have succeeded.

Krishnamurthy, the General Manager of Desi, the marketing outlet of Charaka, says that Desi was born of the need for rural products to find a way to the urban market. While this ensures a regular demand for and off take of products, it is nevertheless yet to attract the rural customer. Mohan feels deeply about is the inability to sell their products in rural areas. The fact that they have to depend on the city is of deep concern for him. According to him, it will happen only if people use things that are made in their own area. However Mohan feels that in the course of time, even rural people who have moved away from cotton to synthetic fabrics, will eventually come back to cotton and to hand looms.

What I feel very strongly about is people's attitudes towards fabric. When we were young, terry cot and terylene fabrics were not there. There was only cotton. Then because cotton was difficult to dry during the rains, etc, people stopped using cotton. Now those other fabrics have become fashionable and people stopped using cotton altogether. But we need cotton for daily use at home. We cannot dry our bodies using terry cot fabric. In the end we have to come back to cotton.

4. Charaka and Handloom

Charaka produces jubba (kurta) from machine-spun yarn. All the processes involved from dyeing the yarn to stitching the jubba are done by the hand. Figure 1 in the appendix gives the flow-chart of the processes involved. Mohan talks of an incident when he once participated in the Mysore Dassara exhibition for selling the jubbas produced by charaka. About 4-5 students were standing before the stall. One of them pointed out a jubba to his friend and remarked how nice it was. To which the latter said, 'chhee chhee' and went out. Mohan called him and said,

"What do you think of this [jubba], this is made in our country. The shirt and that collar that you are wearing, those are leftovers of the British. You don't feel ashamed to wear that, but you feel ashamed to wear this jubba?"

Shamsie talks of the origins of weaving in Charaka.

There were a few looms which in a decrepit condition under some [government] scheme long ago, when this taluk was granted 5-6 sheds for weaving. They had spent around two years – organising training, etc, but for a variety of reasons, it never took off. First we started tailoring with Batte Mallappa in Handigodu. One of them, Anjanappa was an expert weaver, and he agreed to support us. People started getting trained in weaving and one by one people started getting jobs.

Gouramma is a trained Hase Kale artist and was involved in the Anganwadi training project. She had already undergone training in weaving for nine months as part of a government sponsored scheme. The trainees were then paid a stipend of Rs.300/month and they were told that if they didn't continue with the occupation, they would have to return the stipend, she was therefore forced to weave. She continued to weave at home, the yarn was provided by the department and they took back the woven fabric and she would receive wages.

When the tailoring unit was started Charaka used to buy Khadi to stitch the jubbas from a person called Malleshappa in Hosanagara. Then one day Prasanna asked Gouramma as to why not start weaving also since she was already trained. She contacted her co-trainees who had learned with her and one of them agreed and so they started with two looms. Now it has grown to 50 looms and from four sewing machines to a total of 75 members in the tailoring department (including tailors and cutters).

Charaka is being set up and nurtured as a handloom cooperative against the backdrop of the handloom sector in India struggling against the Powerloom. Is powerloom the future of handloom? Prasanna has a strong position on this. He believes that handloom has been a historical priority, a political priority; but not an industrial or an economic priority. There are many advocates of the powerloom - politicians who dare not suggest this openly, but indirectly allowing it to drift towards powerloom. To them Prasanna says that he has no

answer. One simply has to take a position just as he has taken a position. That position is his ideological stance against what he calls the “self-sufficient” machine. He has recently published a book in kannada “Yantragalannu Kalachona Banni”(Come let us deconstruct the machine).

When you are constructing something like this (Charaka), we have to remember that we are deconstructing the machine. Deconstructing what machine? The self sufficient machine. A machine that runs on its own. A machine that doesn't need human hands to drive it, pull it or turn it.

According to Prasanna, the deconstruction of the machine has to be done by the people. Governments can never deconstruct. It is the human hand which is clutching the machine and not vice versa. According to Prasanna, the perception is that the machine is inevitable.

It is not inevitable. It is inevitable because we are holding onto it desperately. We have to just leave it. It does not have a life of its own. The moment you leave it, it dies.

Of course the whole problem is that how do we let go of the machine? It is so entrenched in our daily lives and our whole lifestyle has got used to it. Prasanna thinks that each person has to do it at his or her level to the extent he or she can. It will have a snowballing effect, and what is so wonderful about this snowballing effect he says is that morally one starts feeling better. The smallest thing that you do in your life in that direction makes you feel a better human being, he says.

It is the human hand that drives the handloom. This is what a weaver in Moorkai has to say about how human hands keep the machine alive...

...if we leave the machine [loom] idle, the loom goes dead. If we stop weaving for 2-3 days, we find it difficult to resume weaving. The machine becomes stiff. If we keep working on it, the machine works well and the fabric also comes out fine. If we stop for 2-3 days, the machine becomes dead. That is how it is.

In some sense this is the balance that Charaka is trying to achieve – the balance between the machine and the hand that runs it.

Charaka's main economic activity – the making and selling of hand loom jubbas – is also its attempt at reinforcing indigenous cultural values. What Charaka therefore aspires to when it sells it jubbas is to 'recreate the human connect between the maker of the product and the consumer of the product' – this connection between the hand that produces the jubba and the body that wears it. Prasanna therefore sees this attempt as nothing short of a movement to create a different kind of a lifestyle, one that is indigenous, more attuned to one's natural and cultural moorings.

Unlike the Gandhian khadi advocates, Charaka's stand on handloom is not puritanical. Charaka has tried to balance the use of machines. They use spun yarn and are not against

computers! According to Prasanna, Charaka is a compromise. Many Gandhians ask him why he is not producing khadi? They are upset that they use the name charaka for a handloom cooperative. Prasanna is very candid here and says that according to him, what is important is to help the hand get work. Today in India, there are more people getting work through hand weaving than hand spinning.

When the time comes, I will not mind reviving hand spinning. At this juncture, I do not want to be stuck with a metaphor. Khadi is a metaphor. The reality has moved beyond this metaphor, and I want to be one step ahead this reality and catch it before it reaches the powerloom.

A lot of deliberation has gone into the choice of weaving as an economic activity for Charaka. According to him, India has had a strong tradition in weaving. We have had highly skilled weavers who wove a variety of fabrics. These skills are not being valued today. According to Mohan, many weavers are leaving their vocation and migrating from the villages to cities in search of jobs. An effort is being made by Charaka to revive the weaving industry. Charaka has raised these issues with the government at all levels – both at the State and National levels.

Charaka has been actively involved in the reviving of the handloom sector in Karnataka. They now have tie-ups with the traditional weaving communities in Mahalingapur, Gajendragadh and Jagalur and Davangere in North Karnataka. They send dyed yarn to these places and get fabric. They started with the intention of providing the weavers with some regular work, and asked them to form Self Help Groups and started sending them yarn. Today Vishwanath's unit at Gajendragarh has grown to such an extent that he buys yarn from Charaka and sells them fabric. At other places, they pay labour charges. At Jagalur the aim was to also get khadi weavers into their fold. The intention was to popularise khadi and help it grow. . This has worked out well for Charaka, since they get very good quality fabric from these traditional weavers. And they are working with the weaving clusters – which are dying out. Of course, it helps with their demand, but it also helps to keep the traditional weaving sector alive. Swetha Shettar, a designer who was associated for long with Charaka and is now consulting them in their export related projects, has worked with weavers and she says weaving is all that they know, but they cannot earn enough. So Charaka is trying to revive them. For example, "khanas" – traditional silk and cotton blouse pieces worn by women in Maharashtra and Karnataka are no longer in demand – it's gone out of style. How to re-create the demand for khanas in today's context, according to what the customers want is then the challenge.

Also small things like telling the weaver to increase the width of the fabric, so that some other product like bags can be made out of it. All these things matter, because otherwise nobody is giving the weaver work. Powerlooms are everywhere.

According to Shweta, Charaka is one of its kind in the whole of India providing natural dyes and handloom at such a reasonable price. Shweta states that the moment anything is claimed

as “craft”, people feel justified in hiking the price. She feels that just because fabrics are being produced using handloom and natural dyes, it does not mean the price has to be hiked..

This ideology is evident even in Desi’s pricing strategy – profit margins are kept very low and being a cooperative, all profits are ploughed back to Charaka. Workers’ wages are low but they are paid ‘decent living’ wages and also provided benefits such as subsidised meals, health insurance and home loans. Increase in wages is never an easy decision since that would entail raising prices of products, which decision in turn can only be taken in consultation with Desi.

At Charaka, women from non-weaver communities are being taught to weave. We asked Shweta how difficult it is teaching weaving to a person who does not come from a traditional weaving family.

Quality wise, these people have picked up quite well. But it is really difficult teaching weaving to a non-weaver.

Shweta however feels that one of the reasons why Charaka has succeeded despite not having a traditional weaver community was because they began with women. According to her, despite being first generation weavers, she finds no difference in the quality of weaving and dyeing at Charaka and elsewhere. She says that there has also been a tremendous change in their fabric. At the beginning, the fabric was too thick. From a 20s’ count, they have now gone to a 60s’ count³.

It was difficult – they were saying – it’s too thin, we cannot do it. And we had to explain to them that finer the fabric is, for a lady – it drapes better. 40s’ is too rough for us to do different cuts.

All this while, they have been weaving on the basic loom – two shafts. They are now trying to introduce two more shafts – which is going to make it slightly tougher for the weavers. May not be so for the traditional weaver, but definitely for them. So they have to be given rigorous training. Therefore there are limitations. Shweta says that even when she has to make these slight changes, she has to think twice on whether the girls can manage it.

It’s not about the master weaver. Will the girls be able to manage? They are scared to try checks because you have to change the weft twice. They feel they won’t be able to manage it. But today I made that girl sit in front of me and do it. It’s just a matter of giving them confidence.

According to Shweta, that is also the impression of the management that they know the local mindset and they hesitate to introduce any changes because they feel it will be too difficult for the girls. But it’s high time she says that we change this.

³ All the cloth made above a yarn count of 40s’ are treated as fine cotton cloth.

We know it's going to be difficult, but at least let's try. Once we try and it doesn't work out, it's OK. But at least we tried.

There is also the same problem with Charaka as most of the crafts sector. They don't have a person dealing with designs or with the market initially - they tend to bring them much later and there is some re-invention of the wheel that has to take place. Shweta again,

I asked them to make a color blanket. Where you put all your colors in five or eight inches as warps, and put the same colors as weft. So that in one entire blanket you get all the possible colors you can think of. Which is the first thing you do when you start, and here it's done after so many years. But that's the problem with all crafts organisations. They reach a certain level and then realise that they need professional guidance, help.

5. Charaka as a Cooperative

Economic activity has to be at the basis of any cooperative – it is the glue that binds the members. Ultimately, a cooperative is at heart a particular form of organizing business. It should provide a valuable gain to its members just as a successful corporate provides gains to its shareholders. Therefore, economic sustainability is as crucial to a cooperative as it is to a corporate. According to Prasanna, it is the prerequisite of any cooperative movement.

I would say that that is the pre-requisite even for a political movement. The key question is how to run a cooperative, or a political movement or any institution in a sustainable way. The activity has to be sustainable. In a theoretical sense, that is the basic prerequisite.

Prasanna's stand on cooperatives goes beyond handloom.

For any sort of productive activity in a village, I don't see any other structure than the cooperative structure. If you have to keep it out of bounds of exploitative elements to come in, it is the best. I do not know about other structures.

Unfortunately, the discussion of cooperatives in the Indian context cannot be done on a tabula rasa. The history of the cooperative movement in India is fraught with conflict-ridden legacies. Encouraging and promoting cooperatives has been on the agenda of the Indian state since Independence, but in this zeal, the state could never allow the cooperatives to shed its state-sponsored character. Prasanna again,

The problem with the cooperatives is that we know everything about how it should work, and how it is not working. Unless it becomes a national movement, the right sort of cooperative will not pick up. They will be only a few. The responsibility of keeping cooperatives going has fallen on the govt., the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy cannot do it. They have been doing their job, of registering cooperatives and seeing to it that some of the structures are in place. Help from the state is needed, but there is no push from the people.

Cooperatives can only succeed if they grow as a part of people's movements, and therein also lies the difficulties that Prasanna and his ilk face.

Wherever cooperatives are surviving, they are doing so – because at some point they were a part of people's movements. Today people's movements have almost vanished all over the country. The whole country is [moving] towards the free market economy.

5.1 Management and administration of the Cooperative

Charaka was registered as a Cooperative Society in 1996. Starting with six tailors who put in shares of Rs.4000/-, Charaka is today over 200-member strong. A member can apply for shares after six months of joining. There are around 25 men working here who have bought shares in the names of their spouse/sister/mother. Each member is required to purchase a share costing Rs.111/- Its sales turnover for the year 2008-09 was Rs.98.76 lakhs.

The main office is located at its own premises in Heggodu. This office houses the administrative unit, a tailoring unit. It also accommodates a few weavers, dyeing, shrinking and ironing units. Another office in Heggodu called Achu Mechu houses the weaving centre. This is also where the printing unit is located. In addition there are rented premises in villages in and around Heggodu where weaving units have been set up to accommodate between 5-10 weavers each. This has been done for the convenience of persons living near those villages. A few tailors also work from home, visiting Heggodu on alternate days to collect fabric and bring back stitched garments. Since Charaka's prime intention is to provide work to people, the production processes are very labour-intensive. The most number of workers are of course employed as tailors and weavers. Apart from that there are also workers who dye yarn, wash and shrink fabrics before they are stitched, iron bales of cloth as well as stitched garments, quality checkers, store keepers, carpenters to repair looms, trainers and cleaners. The table 1 in the appendix shows the number of workers and units in each of the departments.

Charaka's weavers produce around 5500 metres of fabric every month. Charaka also buys around 500 metres of fabric every month from two cooperative societies in Andhra Pradesh. In addition, it supplies yarn to weavers in North Karnataka and procures fabric from them. It works with around 35 weavers in this fashion thereby providing employment to traditional weavers who were on the verge of leaving their occupation for other trades or had already left weaving. The details of its work with weavers in North Karnataka are given in the table 2 in appendix.

The administration in Charaka is undertaken by (a) elected Board and (b) Management Committee. Elections are held once in three years to elect members to the Board of this cooperative society. Care is taken to see that each of the departments is represented on the Board. The members of the current board of the cooperative society are given in table 3 in

the appendix. The Board meets on the 25th of every month to discuss issues such as funds, income and expenditures, projects, recruitments, wages, sales, etc.

Since a majority of the workforce is young and relatively inexperienced, the elected Board also comprises such members. There is therefore also a Management Committee which consists of experienced members – those who have been with Charaka since its beginning. These are the department heads, i.e. persons who are in control of the functions of each of the departments. This committee guides the Board of Directors and conducts the day to day administration and management of the organisation.

The management committee and the Board therefore work in close conjunction to administer the Society. The Management Committee is given in table 4 in the appendix. Routine administrative matters such as leave from work, etc are handled by the department heads. Wage payments, audits, etc. are handled by the accounts department. The wages are fixed by the management committee based on production costs. Wages given are of two types (a) piece-rate and (b) fixed. A majority of payments is on piece-basis, i.e. tailors, weavers, dyers and workers in shrinking and ironing units are paid on the basis of their output, for e.g. the number of metres woven or the number of bundles of yarn dyed, number of garments stitched or ironed, number of metres of fabric shrunk, etc. Workers in the management, administration, printing unit and stores departments are paid a fixed monthly salary.

Prices of products are fixed after discussions with Desi. Maimoona, who looks after the sales end at Desi, Bangalore explained that prices of products can be raised only after discussions with Desi. Since 2000, prices have been revised only thrice. Pavithra, the store manager and Director said that this is an issue that workers often raise. Workers who are paid on a piece basis maintain a register which is submitted to the accounts section at the end of each month and verified by the department heads before disbursement of payments.

Work done on a piece-rate basis takes care of the incentives. According to Ganapathi, the Purchase Manager with Charaka, the piece rate workers are sincere in their work because of the incentive to produce more. It is not that the office staff (those paid fixed wages) are not sincere – it is because the nature of work is such; if they were to do piece work, they would also work with the same sincerity.

Charaka puts workers' interest above everything else and sometimes this can seem at odds with the interests of a commercial market-driven production house [which in fact it is]. Many workers spoke of the importance of markets and the need for ensuring a steady market for its products. As Bhagirathi, the head of the marketing section says,

The market is the foundation on which this organisation rests. In order to pay the 300 odd workers here, to meet any of our production expenses, for any financial transactions, we have to make sure that we have a market [for our products].

And yet, processes in Charaka are the opposite of that followed by conventional production houses. Padmashree is a designer with Charaka. She has worked with garment houses in Bangalore and was therefore able to articulate this difference. In garment factories, all products are dictated by market demands – from the colour and stitch to the design of the garment. Whereas in Charaka, the dyeing department has certain patterns of working based on which they produce yarns of certain colours.

There [in garment factories] the marketing department specifies what kind of fabric they want and in what colours. Here we don't give any order for the kind of fabric we want. The dyeing department has a certain pattern of which dyes to use for which yarn and in which sequence. So they dye accordingly and the fabrics are in those colour. We just choose from whatever colours of fabric are available. Actually that is not how it should be done. The marketing department should tell us what the demand is based on the items which sell more. We should communicate that to the weaving department who in turn should communicate to the dyeing department. But here the process is reversed, whatever they make, we sell. So the process is reversed.

Work in Charaka is not systematic she feels. She feels that this could be because Desi is Charaka's only customer and to that extent they are secure in the knowledge of an assured customer and do not need to study market demands. Charaka tells Desi to lift whatever stocks they have. There are times when Desi complains that certain colours don't sell and that stocks have been left unsold.

Charaka's commitment to its workers has also put it at loggerheads with the cooperative department whose rules are not always worker-friendly. As per the rules of the cooperative department, the Secretary of the Society is someone who is to be assigned by the department. Apart from the Secretary, an accountant and attendant are also to be deputed by the department with their salaries also being paid by them. However Charaka has so far insisted on an elected member as the Secretary. It has also refused the Department's deputation of persons to the posts of accountant and attendant, choosing instead to recruit local persons to these posts.

As per the rules, the candidates who contest the election to the Governing Board are to provide a list of their assets, security, etc. However, since Charaka is an organisation of poor women, they have only been taking a simple application form from the candidates.

Dakshayani is the Secretary of the Cooperative Society. She mentioned delayed audits as another of the problems being faced by the organisation. Although they have conducted internal audits, these reports are not acceptable to the cooperative department. The last audit was in 2003. Repeated requests to the Cooperative Department have resulted in the department agreeing to conduct the audit and papers were being prepared for the audit to be held in November 2009.

There are also the problems of seeking permissions from the department for every activity, for instance for incurring expenses above a certain amount, they have to seek permission from the department. The production manager gave an example of how they went ahead and repaired machines without waiting for approvals from the department as waiting would have meant falling behind production deadlines. This resulted in an audit objection. Nor can they build or extend infrastructure without department permission. These are issues that most cooperative societies have to face. Says Dakshayani,

Of course we are running on trust and faith. Strictly speaking, if we follow the Government rules, we are bound by them, we are to provide security, list of assets, etc. owned by the directors. We are accountable to them and they are accountable to us. But I have told them [department] so many times, that we are just a group of uneducated women who have started an organisation. And we have earned a name not just in the taluk but in the entire district. I have told them that they should help organisations like ours. But who will help if they are not fed (bribed)?

Dakshayani feels that so long as Charaka was a small organisation, they were able to get away with such differences with the Department. However now that the organisation is growing, they feel that falling in line with the department rules will be inevitable.

Right now, Prasanna Sir is there and we don't have to worry about anything, wherever we go, our work gets done. So we tend to neglect [formalities, rules, etc.] But we cannot continue like this. The organisation has grown. We have to function as per the government rules. They [the cooperative dept.] tell us that we are not following the rules of the department. They cannot make an exception for us. So we are at slight loggerheads with them. I am trying very hard [to set things right]. How long can we continue like this, we have to put an end to it at some point. So I want to see that it is during my tenure. I want to put an end to things [the informal way of working – not following department rules] during my time.

Lakshminarayan, the newly recruited accountant is now in the process of putting together documents and systems and synchronising the processes across various departments.

6. Charaka as a workplace

The sense one gets of Charaka as a work-place is that of safety and security, where workers are unhurried and unharried, yet conscious of time and quality. With most workers being young unmarried girls, the atmosphere is almost akin to a college or school. In fact more than one worker remarked that they find their work place to be a continuation of their school days. Many of them have worked as agricultural labourers and domestic helps – often the only livelihood option for women in this area – and working at Charaka is certainly a far cry from such work. For one, there is the dignity and security attached to working with a formal institution such as Charaka.

Prema, working in the dyeing unit, talks very fondly of Charaka.

Parents say they are unable to get jobs for their children, even before they [children] try for a job, they say, we will not be able to get you a job, it is enough if you learn how to read and write. They say, sit at home and learn to do house work, this will help you when you go to your husband's house. That is how it is, even if one or two persons educate their children, that is a great thing. So in such a situation, this place is almost like a college and we get to work here.

A young tailor at Genasinakuni, where Charaka's bag-making unit is located, is also transported back to her school days through her work at Charaka.

And then whatever be the situation be at home, the moment we come here we forget everything, we work together with our colleagues, laughing and joking, this makes us happy. We are quite jolly. Whatever be the problems at home, we leave all that behind when we come here. We remember our school days, we have the same environment here.

A tailor at the baby-wear unit in Heggodu compares Charaka to her school.

We feel happy to be working here. We want this organisation to grow. We have friends here, just like we had friends in school. We fight, become friends again. Somehow, we are very happy together. In addition we also earn. In a way we enjoy ourselves here and we also earn a livelihood.

A weaving unit in Ragihakkalu, a village close to Heggodu employs nine persons. All the young unmarried workers here reported happiness and joy at coming to work. Jayashree, the senior-most among them [she has been working with Charaka for six years] joined Charaka after her mother's death. The event had left her traumatised. She suffered from fainting spells. Her friend, who was working with Charaka, advised her family to send her to work with Charaka. Getting her out of the house and into some occupation would engage her mind and help her recover, she argued. Her doctor concurred and that is how she came to join Charaka. Now she is happy in the company of her co-workers. Her colleague Usha agrees,

So many of us get together here, we work together. We don't feel like the work is too much, we don't feel it is difficult. Even if we find it difficult at times, we find happiness... Weaving is not such an easy job and yet this work gives us happiness. We are here together, we sing...

Jayashree says that when her two year old nephew visited her at work, he exclaimed that it was a 'thaka dhimi shaale' (*thaka-dhimi-school*) referring to the rhythmic beat of the looms.

Though the wages paid at Charaka are not very attractive [ranging from a minimum of Rs.1500 to Rs.5000 per month], workers are attracted by the security of continuous employment throughout the year and other benefits such as health benefits, maternity benefits, subsidised lunch and flexible leave rules.

Even the men, for whom especially the wages paid at Charaka are not attractive, report being drawn to Charaka for its work atmosphere, the sense of liberty and kinship with fellow-workers. Manjunath, who has been working with Charaka's dyeing unit for the past three years, says that it is difficult to find the kind of rapport that exists between workers in Charaka in other work places. He used to work as a mason in Sagar before his friend introduced him to Charaka. He no longer has to search for work as he is assured of a job throughout the year.

Umapathi, Manjunath's colleague in the dyeing unit mentions the absence of discrimination in Charaka. He has also worked as an agricultural labourer in the fields of upper caste landlords.

Working with the upper caste people is very difficult' he says, 'if they know that we have no money, they will try to make us work as bonded labourers. They give us loans and enslave us. Here it is not like that, we are paid according to the work that we do. They are not so strict here, there is no harassment, their only demand of us is of good quality, apart from that they do not harass us for anything.

This lack of harassment and the sense of peace and happiness that workers get from Charaka came up in many conversations. Though they talk of the low wages, they yet talk of the satisfaction, peace and sense of security that they derive from this place. *Khushi* (happiness) and *nemmadi* (peace) were the oft-repeated words.

Girija, who has been with Charaka since its inception, first worked as a sweeper. She was a member of the first Board of Directors. She feels a strong sense of ownership over the place.

I feel this place is my own. The salary is not much, I am paid Rs.2000/- per month and have six mouths to feed. I left for a while to work elsewhere, but was persuaded by my colleagues here to come back

Girija is the only daughter of a blind mother. Her mother used to beg for a living and Girija herself started work at the age of seven. She used to work in the Ninasam canteen and has grown up seeing theatre persons like Prasanna and Mandya Ramesh. Her husband met with an accident when her three children were very young and since then she has had the sole responsibility of looking after her three children, aged mother and her husband. Adding to her worries is the fact that her youngest son suffers from extreme obesity and is in need of surgery to correct an eye ailment – a surgery that she cannot afford. Girija's has been a life of hardship and poverty. And yet, she finds peace in Charaka.

Whatever problems I have at home, when I come here and talk about it to my friends, I feel much better. I got the courage to speak after joining Charaka.

She served as a Director on Charaka's first Board. After a hysterectomy, Girija had to take a long break from work. Since she could not resume her work of sweeping, she has rejoined

as the caretaker of a newly formed crèche. The crèche, at present, takes care of eleven children whose parents work in Charaka.

For Girija, life has improved after joining Charaka. Around 10-11 SHGs (Self Help Groups) have been formed for members of Charaka. The SHGs meet once a month and two of them have availed bank loans. She is the president of an SHG within Charaka and also is a member of an SHG outside of Charaka. She has taken loans from the SHGs, to repair her house. She has dug a well – earlier she had to depend on neighbours for water, now she has her own well. She bought a TV because her sons wanted one. She cannot aspire to be like other well-off persons, but she does want at least to live like the others do, with some degree of comfort, so whatever be her struggles, she makes an effort to live comfortably. Though she has had a tough life, she is happy after joining Charaka. She likes to come here to work, if she doesn't come to work for even a day, if she is at home, her mind gets filled with worry (*depressing thoughts*). She cannot tell her sons or her old mother about her troubles. So she comes here and tells her colleagues. She has found peace and happiness in this work. She has had a tough life and continues to have one, but hopes that her sons will have a good life.

Dakshayani echoes Girija's sentiments,

I like it here, whatever be the work pressures or tensions at home, as soon as I come here, I feel free. That gives great happiness. I used to feel bad about leaving my baby at home, that I have to leave him alone [she has a one year old child]. But how long can one do that work [house work, looking after the child]? In the afternoons I would feel that time just does not pass.

Dakshayani has been with Charaka for three years. She used to work in a cooperative society close to her home. On her visits to Heggodu she had seen Charaka. Enamoured of the work atmosphere that she saw in Charaka, she approached Prasanna with a request for a job. By then she had left her previous company. The accountant's post was vacant and she joined Charaka. She used to leave home at 7.30 in the morning to get to Heggodu which is more than 30 kms from her hometown. She would get back only at 9 in the night. She had to spend Rs.200 over and above her entire monthly salary just to meet her monthly bus fare. Later she moved into a rented room in Heggodu after which she got married. She now lives in Sagar (8 kms from Heggodu) with her husband and in-laws.

The units functioning in and around Heggodu also serve the purpose of providing livelihoods to people close to their homes.

Moorkai, a village situated 8km from Heggodu has a weaving unit which employs 11 people. A few women from this village approached Charaka looking for work and they were told to come for training in a group of around 10. So the first set of 3-4 women gathered the current lot of 11, formed a self-help group called the 'Kushala Nekaarara Sangha' They underwent a six-month training course and came back to Moorkai to start this

unit. The unit functions out of a rented place, with the owner of the shed being one of the members.

The members recollect their initial struggles and how Charaka stood by them.

At first only 4 persons went [for the training]. We hired a rickshaw and four of us went. The rickshaw used to cost us Rs.180/- per day. We paid Rs.180 per day. They gave us a monthly payment of Rs.600/-. However even that was not really enough, so they also told us to get more people [to join the training], we also thought we need more people, so we got in more, it is good for them also because they get work, it is good for us. That place [Heggodu] is very far and there are not many buses that suited our timings, we had to be there at 9.30 and leave at 5 pm, there are no buses at that time, so we had to hire a vehicle. On some days we used to walk. There are days when we have walked 8 km.

It was very difficult for us when we had to travel there for the training, but afterwards when we finished the course and told them to establish the unit here...

But they have also come here and given us a lot of training. We didn't know about [this work] very well nor did we have any experience. Even after establishing the unit here, they came here for many months to train us.

Now things are OK, now we are not dependant on the monthly wage of Rs.600/-. We know that if we want we can earn even upto Rs.1000 in a month. It gives us happiness. We have knowledge of the work now, even if something happens to the loom, we now have the confidence that we can set it right.

It is great that we were able to get trained at Heggodu and were even paid a stipend of Rs.600/month during the training period. Elsewhere, they ask you to pay fees for training. But here they paid us a wage for attending their training. For that we should be happy and always grateful to them.

Like so many other members of Charaka, the women at Moorkai also place great importance on the security of work.

Then (before Charaka) we used to work in people's houses. We have to listen to everything they say and we have to ask them every day if they have work for us, we can't be sure of employment

Now it is not like that, we have an assured livelihood. That is what makes us happy. Even if we earn only Rs.10, it is good that it is a specific place.

Now we have found work at one place. If it is work in people's houses we have to go looking for some house or the other every day, or we have to go and work in the fields, all of us here are poor

We had to keep going from place to place looking for work, beg people for work. Now we are at peace because we have regular work at one place.

Kavita, the manager of the quilt-making unit is a leader in the making. She is a tailor and has now taken over cutting in the quilt unit and also supervises the unit. She is so happy

managing her young close-knit team of seven girls, that she wishes she never has to leave Charaka. She is from a village called Honnesara. She joined Charaka 3 years ago. In the quilt making units, pieces of fabric left over from stitching jubbas are stitched together to make quilts. She seemed very happy at Charaka, always referring to it as “Our Charaka”.

I cannot think of leaving Charaka, that is how much I like this place. We don't have any problems here, we have all kinds of facilities in our Charaka. There is no difference between seniors and juniors. Now I joined 3.5 years ago. I used to do tailoring first. Now I have been assigned the complete responsibility of a unit. In case of any problem, even small problems, all we have to do is give a missed call and they [people in the main office] immediately call us back. We can ask for any kind of support. Even if we want a needle or if we need an auto. We are far away from the main office isn't it? If we are not well, we can call them and tell them that we need to go home, they immediately let us go home. If anything happens to anybody in our Charaka there are even facilities for hospitalization. From hospitalization to everything, we get all kinds of help here in Charaka.

I don't feel like taking even a day's leave. I don't have that feeling, that I must work because I am paid a salary. I get happiness [working here]. All the girls working here are my friends, they are like me, that gives me even greater happiness. Those of us working in the unit enjoy even more freedom. [as compared to the persons working in the main unit in Heggodu]

Amita is a weaver in the Othigodu centre near Heggodu. She is also a director having replaced another director who left the Board last month. She belongs to the village of Varadamoola which is about a kilometre away from Othigodu.

She and her sister have been working in Charaka for the past seven years. Her mother is a labourer in an arecanut farm. Their father deserted them when they were children and the mother had to look after her daughters single-handedly. After her seventh standard, her mother asked her to join Charaka as she could not afford to send her children to school. Amita wanted to study and tried to persuade her mother to continue her education. She even stopped eating for two days in the hope that her mother would agree, but then had to relent and the sisters joined work.

She is now happy to work in Charaka because all the other workers are of her age and her friends, so it is good to be with friends. She likes to weave – the sight of the moving shuttle makes her happy, the loom sounds like anklets and she likes to see the cloth which gets turned out from the loom.

Bhagirathi, the head of the marketing section and a senior member is proud of her involvement with Charaka, of the opportunity it has given her to learn so many things especially about marketing. She values most the learning in marketing that she continues to have at Charaka. She is confident of her abilities of mentoring new-comers and taking on additional responsibility. She values the opportunity to interact with senior government officials such as the Deputy Commissioner and she recalled how her familiarity with such

officials (even before she started working with Charaka, from when she was a volunteer with the literacy campaign) helped Charaka.

Nagarathna, the computer operator is grateful to Charaka for the opportunity it gave her to learn computers. She had always wanted to learn computers and she was able to do so in Charaka. She joined the stores department and started learning computers from the senior operator and went on to become a computer operator. She also values the environment in Charaka and the companionship of her colleagues.

There [previous work place] also I was happy. Here the environment is different. Here there are opportunities for growth. There also I didn't have any problems. But we were less exposed, as if we were in a remote corner (moolenalli iruttiddivi). We didn't read much then. Here we get so many books and magazines to read. Our general knowledge grows. After coming here my general knowledge has improved a lot.

Charaka is an organisation open to experimentation. Swetha mentions this in the context of Charaka trying several natural dyes – adike chogaru (husk of areca-nut) being one such example.

I like the fact that for dyes, the first priority for Charaka to see if it is locally available. Which is not always the case with other organisations – they would rather follow tried and tested things. Charaka would not have been able to discover “adigese” otherwise.

Bhagirathi does realize Charaka's role as an organization in fostering equity. She mentioned how every member has equal rights. She gave the example of Girija who was made Director of the Board. Charaka's ability to tide over caste problems and treat all workers equally is something that is valued by workers.

Weavers in Ragihakkalu also feel proud of their association with Charaka. Vasanth, a weaver there calls it the 'Charaka Weather'. He also stresses the lack of discrimination and the gratitude of having escaped work at 'Gowdas or Brahmins houses'

The secretary, Dakshayani talks of how Charaka has helped its workers overcome caste-based discriminations at the workplace.

Earlier, we didn't have a canteen, we used to make tea ourselves. We don't have any caste based differences. People from SC/ST communities would also make tea and everyone would drink. People should not say we will not drink, etc. And then nobody should say, I will not sweep and clean this place, I get a salary of Rs.10000 so why should I do this work – things like that. What I feel is that if the need arises, one should be ready to do anything. People should not have the thirst for power. That is what we ask for. Only such people will last here. It is not that we don't have problems, sometimes there are small fights among workers, sometimes it is because they lack awareness, at such times we cannot scold them, and we have to tell them. When I came also some people objected, then when they

came to know me, their objections were quietened. That is how it is, we have to adjust to people and take them along.

According to Rudranna, there is no hierarchy in Charaka, which is the way work should be. It is a place where he learnt how to live. It is not a mere factory, but a place which gives people opportunity to build upon their skills. At Charaka, there is no supervision of workers. Unlike the garment factories in Bangalore, there is no shouting at workers or no force being used. He has seen garment units in Bangalore, where the supervisors don't know how to stitch clothes, yet they are hired at salaries much higher than that of tailors to monitor the tailors – in effect supervisors are hired to harass the workers. At Charaka, there is no ill-treatment and people are not treated like machines. In this system, everybody is treated equally. Rudranna is one of the few workers in Charaka who, because of having lived and worked in a garment unit in Bangalore, is able to genuinely appreciate the work culture at Charaka - the fact that Charaka has no harsh supervisory systems and that everybody is equal. Since he has returned from the city, he was able to clearly state the difficulties of city living and so, he is able to understand the importance of providing employment in villages.

Madhura is a graduate from a village nearby called Sampekkai. She joined Charaka five years ago and now heads the cutting department. We provoked Madhura in jest, 'What if we ask, 'Is this like a garment factory'? And this was her reply,

I will never say that it is like a garment factory. It is not like a garment factory at all. None of the rules of a garment factory are applicable here.

Malalakshmi, who heads the weaving department at Charaka feels that the work in Charaka is such that no one is harassed here (*yarigu himse anisalla*). She said she gets immense satisfaction from her work at Charaka. Charaka also thinks about the welfare of the persons seeking employment. She gave the example of a girl who applied for a job after finishing her 10th. The girl was good at her studies and wished to continue studying. However her parents could not afford to send her for higher studies. Charaka offered her part time work of winding thread on the bobbin – work which she could do from home – and convinced her parents to send her to college.

It is not like any garment factory, there (in the garment factory) working conditions are not so good (ishtu sukha iralla). For instance there people are compelled to work even if they are ill, but here people can take leave if they are ill.

Mahalakshmi belongs to Sigandur and was a teacher in a government school (temporary) before she married and came to Heggodu. She worked as a nursery school teacher here for three years before joining Charaka nine years ago. She was selected as the Secretary of the Society within six months of joining. She has been the director for 8 years as she has been re-elected.

Her husband didn't want her to join Charaka but a relative who was a member of Charaka, asked her to join as they were in need of a staff. Since she knew some tailoring she wanted to join the tailoring department; however as she had been a teacher and could handle accounts, so she was asked to join the stores department. When she joined her monthly salary was Rs.400. She has since worked in all departments including tailoring and now weaving and knows every production activity in Charaka except printing. After taking charge of the weaving department she has even learned to weave. She has been involved in stock checking, quality checking, sending items to the market and quality check.

On being asked about her personal growth in Charaka, she said she hasn't had much time to think about it because work has kept her so busy. However she feels she gained strength to face life after joining Charaka. Her husband had wanted to start a hotel and he pressurized her to leave the job and join him. However her colleagues persuaded her to stay on and she has continued to stay. She has the courage to take loans now and has taken a loan of Rs.10,000 from an SHG at Charaka. She has resisted pressure to leave Charaka and work at the Hotel her husband had started. She took a lot of pride in the fact that though weaving was new to her, now that she is heading it – she is able to solve any problem that crops up.

Padmashree talks about how in the production department, they find solutions to many practical problems on their own. She is learning those solutions from them. For instance if there is no electricity, they use coal to iron the clothes. She had never touched coal. But now she too has learnt to use coal to iron her clothes during power cuts at home. According to Padmashree, in the field of designing, learning is mainly related to creativity and anyone can learn. In the printing section, even as the girls learn the new designs that she teaches them, they tell her about the old designs that they have been doing and she learns from them.

Gouramma – their first President who has been in the loom department right from the beginning supervises the weavers and gives tips to learners says she has learned a lot about administration after joining Charaka. She also got an opportunity to present her art (hase kale) widely through the anganwadi training program. Charaka also uses the hase-kale motifs on its files and jubbas. She learned this art form from her mother. Her two sisters also know this art. Besides herself another member of Charaka, Parvathi, also practices this art form. Gouramma is proud of Charaka's growth from being only a tailoring unit to one that has dyeing, printing, weaving, printing, fabric printing. Parvathi, who is now with the weaving unit is also very proud of her art and is happy that Charaka gave her an opportunity to showcase it.

Gayathri, the current President of the Charaka society is very happy to have joined Charaka. What appeals to her in Charaka that there is no caste or class based discriminations. There are people from all social classes working here including the better-off. Everything that she knows about work and about "business", she has learned after coming here.

According to Gayatri, there is a lot of satisfaction (nemmadi) that comes from sitting together and talking and she has now gained the confidence to talk and negotiate after joining Charaka. And despite her 'director-persona' she had this to say about her work,

I was a very shy, silent girl earlier, would not even lift her head up while walking. My personality has changed so much now that when old friends from school meet me today, they wonder if it is the same Gayathri.

She said she would certainly like to continue to working even after marriage if given a chance.

Though Charaka is a women's cooperative society and the workers are predominantly women, there are still a few men who are working with Charaka. As has already been mentioned, the wages paid by Charaka are particularly unappealing for men as they can earn twice as much by working at construction sites in Sagar or Shivamogga. However a few of them have established their independent business units and sell their products through Desi while continuing to provide their services to Charaka. This way they have an opportunity to grow without being a burden on the organisation and the organisation continues to benefit from their involvement.

Rudranna, the production manager, Kulkarni, the dyeing manager and Sundar the tailoring master of Charaka (who have been with Charaka since its inception) have their own production units in Heggodu – independent of Charaka – and sell their products through the Desi outlets. (Details given in the appendix in table 5.)

Sundar is the master tailor at Charaka. He belonged to a poor family near Heggodu. His father had some land but not enough money to educate his children well. In their circle, his was the only family that was so poor. All his other relatives were well-off, highly educated and with good jobs. From child hood his dream was to be like his well-off relatives. He started to learn tailoring when he was only 12 years old. Every day he would walk to come to Heggodu to learn the job and at the age of 14 he set up shop in Heggodu. He has been working hard now for the past twenty five years and continues to work for about eighteen hours a day even today. He starts work in his tailoring unit early in the morning, comes to Charaka, where he heads the tailoring department and then goes back to his own enterprise in the afternoon. Today tailoring earns him a good income and it is work that gives him great happiness. As long he is working he feels physically fit. He produces jackets and sells them through the Desi outlet (under the brand-name Shyli). He had a dream of establishing a unit and providing employment to around 20 people – he has been able to do that through Charaka. He had already earned a reputation locally as a good tailor – in Heggodu and the villages surrounding it and that there is not a single household that will not have at least one garment stitched by him. He is happy that with Charaka's support his clothes are now being sold outside Heggodu also.

Ganapathi, the purchase manager at Charaka, belongs to Heggodu. After completing his graduation, he was helping out at his brother's grocery store. Since he was a graduate, a staff at Charaka asked him if he would be interested in joining Charaka and that is how he joined Kavi Kavya Trust and looked after marketing operations. Then when all operations moved to Charaka he joined Charaka. When he joined he was an assistant accountant helping Ramesh (the current General Manager who also moved to Charaka from Kavi Kavya Trust), now he is the Purchase Manager.

On being asked what he feels about working in Charaka, he replied that he is happy that there is an organisation such as Charaka in his own village. This has helped him get a job in his village itself. With even a much higher salary in a city Bangalore he would not have been able to save a single rupee. Life is also very difficult in the city (*baduku kashta*). Being in Heggodu he is able to take care of his parents. However he says that for people who are very ambitious (*wish to earn a lot*) this is not the right place. The salary is not very high, he gets Rs.3000/- month, but compared to other factories even in Sagar – with their very strict conditions - working conditions here are very good.

According to Ganapathi, men will usually not come to work here at such low salaries. Even carpenters earn more. Whereas women are willing to work for low salaries. Ganapathi had a perceptive take on the men workers at Charaka. According to him, one cannot say that work here makes one financially sound. However there is a system here. He will certainly recommend this as a work place to others, along with all the conditions – salary, nature of work, the room rent in this place etc.

Rajendra works in the stores department. He has completed his BA. He chose to work with Charaka because he has some land which he is looking after. He got married recently. The income from the land will not suffice for his family and so he has joined Charaka to supplement his income. He says that many people in and around his village, especially those who have got big jobs (well paying) in Bangalore have sold their lands and settled in Bangalore. However, he does not want to leave his parents and go away to Bangalore or any other place to look for work hence he is happy to be at Heggodu.

Mohan talks of another experience that he has had after he started working with Charaka. He lost the desire for money. According to him,

This fear, of what will happen tomorrow, the day after, that fear has left me. I don't have that fear, because he (Prasanna) has shown us that it is possible to live with what one has.

Mohan says that losing that fear is very important. Only when that happens can we be human. Wherever he goes, now he says he has the confidence of creating a market. Mohan also says that he was never very confident of talking to people. He used to be very shy. Now that is not the case. According to him every body at Charaka is developing that courage now, and that is how it should happen.

6.1 Leadership in Charaka

The members talked about the autonomy in day to day decision making and running of the Society. It is providing leadership opportunities to its members.

Kavitha – wanted to remain a tailor but has been assigned supervisory jobs by the senior management and is now adept at leading her team.

I am quite strict about quality [laughs], I am strict. Sometimes I scold the girls [if they have made a mistake] and they rectify it. They make long faces [when I scold them] but they redo the pieces.

At the same time she is aware that her team members have the same set of rights and responsibilities that she has and that there is nothing to set her apart from her peers even though she has 'power' or 'authority'.

They redo it, but they never complain. They just do as I say. That makes me happy. They don't have to really listen to me, we all have the same rights, they can turn around and ask, 'who are you to tell us'. But they never say that. I have maintained good relationships with them.

And when asked how it is that she has sustained healthy relationships with her colleagues, she says,

I listen to all their problems, even their personal problems, about their family. They tell me about their problems. Whatever their personal issues are, they tell me about everything. Sometimes I advise them or guide them.

On asking Kavitha as whether she would be interested in standing for the elections for the Board, we got a very practical answer,

Next time I will try. The seven persons who are working with me – I think they will definitely vote for me, I am confident about that. But what about other people – you see there are units in different places such as Othigodu, Genasinakuni. I don't know them very well nor do they know me. So if they don't vote for me, I will feel quite bad. Actually I get along well with everybody, whoever comes, I talk to them well, I don't discriminate, and yet, what if they don't vote for me?

Gayathri mentioned how as a President of the Society, she is required to attend to even personal problems of members. Since most members, including herself, are young women, 'love problems' are quite common. Often they have to go out of their way in understanding the problems of the workers. Mahalakshmi also said that she is called upon to solve personal problems of members and narrated the story of a young girl who was very naïve; she became pregnant and didn't even realize that she was pregnant. When Mahalakshmi came to know, she asked the girl about it and found that the man was a much older man. She spoke to the girl's mother in confidence. She didn't let anybody else (her colleagues and

even the girl's father who according to Mahalakshmi was not a good man) know and asked the mother to take care of the girl. The girl eventually left the job.

Whenever possible, Gayathri said she tries to take such young women into confidence and counsel them. If necessary, she also talks to their parents. Work related problems are also quite common, those are handled as and when they arise.

When asked on the advantages of functioning as a cooperative, Gayatri had this to say,

It is better to work together than to work on one's own. One can grow along with others. It is possible for a group of people to grow. Whereas when one works singly, one wishes to grow too fast, (without caring if others get an opportunity to grow as well).

On being asked of her experience as President, how she came to stand in elections, she said that she was a most reluctant entrant into elections – she doesn't like it at all, politics and things like that. However her friends in the cutting department forced her to stand for elections. The post of president in Charaka is reserved for a member from the SC/ST community. She stood for elections hoping she would lose. But she won. She has been a Director now for the past 2.5 years.

According to Mohan, Charaka is like a school or college for most of these girls. They have consciously tried not create a factory like environment. Every year for the past four years, the members have also been organising a cultural fest "Charaka-Utsava" having literary seminars and cultural events, where members look forward to participate. This is in line with the Prasanna's vision about the need for Charaka to be more than just a workplace.

You see you have to operate from within a very limited sphere. You can't be as if you are in a revolutionary political party – having study circles, studying books and all that. It's not possible. They are here for seven hours; out of which six and a half hours are taken on doing something productive. You have to work within that.

The members bring out a small two page monthly newsletter called Chiguru, where all of them are encouraged to write. It was Kulkarni's idea to start this newsletter - Chiguru. Kulkarni was a journalist in Mysore before he joined Kavi Kavya. It serves as an outlet for people in Charaka to express their talents and skills. Gayathri is the editor of the newsletter. It has an 8-member committee which meets for an hour every Saturday. The members are compulsorily required to write articles for the paper. They also invite articles from other members of the Society and even from outsiders. All members have paid an annual subscription fee of Rs.25/- to meet the expenses of the printing the newsletter.

Quality consciousness is an integral part of work culture at Charaka. The recession period has in fact proved to be some sort of a blessing in disguise – during previous years, focus had been on increasing production. In the recession year sales were lower than usual and this gave the organisation some time to focus on quality issues. Madhura, the head of the

cutting department feels that by maintaining high quality it is possible to maintain sales at all times.

However if our products – the dyeing, weaving, - are perfect then our sales will never come down. If they buy a garment and it runs colour they will not come back to buy. If we can assure colour-fast garments, the customers will keep coming back. Since we use natural dyes, it is difficult [to assure]. However if the quality is good, that is a solution to all problems.

Kavitha, the supervisor of the quilt-making unit says how she ensures the quality of the quilts that her unit,

We don't just cut and join pieces mechanically because we have to do it somehow. The quilt should be such that those looking at it must take pleasure in looking at it. That is how nicely we make it. I am quite strict about quality. I am strict.

The president Gayathri feels that natural dyes and handlooms are Charaka's claim to fame and they have to hold on to this and maintain quality if Charaka and Desi are to sustain.

7. Marketing the Jubba

Charaka is making an effort to popularise the jubba made of handwoven fabric and according to Mohan, it has become a success. Charaka's early marketing efforts are a reflection of this attempt. Just as rural entrepreneurs travel from village to village selling their wares on market days in different villages, the workers of Charaka also travelled to various destinations in Karnataka in search of markets. The aim was not to just sell but also to popularise the hand woven jubba – hence much of the early marketing efforts targeted literary fairs and festivals. Mohan was actively involved in Charaka's initial marketing efforts.

We used to travel by bus. We would pack everything and travel for 2-3 days to each location. Then we would go to another location. What we also used to do was to travel to colleges and schools, so that people there also get to know about this. They should also learn to respect this [khadi/handloom]. In those days also we used to travel a lot, to literary meets, drama festivals, even if it was a small musical show we would attend, we didn't leave any programme. Many playwrights and theatre people encouraged us, they bought our products. We were not many people, just one or two, even then we would go out to attend these programmes. Thus we have struggled quite a lot for the growth of this institution.

With Desi, they have a front end for their products. Padmashree feels that Desi being their only market also has its flip side. Unlike in private companies where they have many customers and buyers, there is no such thing here. When the order comes from Desi they send it. In fact Charaka themselves request Desi to take whatever stocks they have. It is because of this that that processes followed here are in reverse of that followed in conventional garment factories.

According to Swetha, there is a need to make Charaka more decentralised and independent and she thinks its time Desi stops handholding Charaka.

Charaka gets hassled each time they get other orders. Charaka has to learn to manage on its own. Desi is being taken for granted and its almost like “you better take whatever fabric I am giving you” which is wrong. You are hitting your customer.

So they are trying to re-work those strategies. Earlier, according to Swetha, because the demand was so huge, Desi had no option but to take whatever was being sent. But now, customers are getting bored and they have a slight decrease in sales – therefore Desi became a bit more strict with the quality.

That’s when stocks started getting piled up here. That’s when they started panicking. And realising that there is a problem. It’s no longer “But I have done so much of brown fabric, and whether you need it or not, I am sending it”. That can’t happen any more.

Swetha feels that a major drawback with the shops (Desi) is that there is no signage, no communication anywhere which says it is handloom, or that it is natural dye. Nobody knows about it. They need to communicate to the customers that ‘we understand that we have defects with our fabrics, but what you are getting is natural dye – which is of value’. Today’s market is flooded with powerloom imitation; people are not getting any value. Fortunately Desi has a good reputation. According to Swetha, their earlier customers knew Prasanna personally and knew about Charaka and the work he was doing.

But the new customers do not know. We are giving them indigo dye, which is the one of the most priced thing in India – indigo, manjishta, pomegranate. We also need to give customers the wash instructions for the clothes. We need to make our customers more aware. Start giving Charaka a face in Desi.

Ultimately, the market has to be catered to. And Swetha thinks that all of us, customers of Desi are sympathetic about the cause, but a customer has every right to think ‘Why should I go to the shop again, there is nothing new.’ According to Swetha there was a bit of a disconnect between Charaka and Desi. Now Charaka is realising why they need to rework their strategies and processes.

According to Swetha, Charaka and Desi both have to still work harder on documentation of their processes. For example Desi has sizes in terms of shoulder and length. Which, according to Swetha is not the way it is done in the market. Fortunately for Desi, the customer has got used to it. But for a new customer – the number of sizes could be quite overwhelming, he would not know what would fit him. They have started following the standardized sizes of small, medium and large – which is also required for the export market.

Up till now Desi and Charaka have targeted only the Bangalore market. Only now have they opened a shop at Dharwad, and it has been a huge success. All of them were a bit sceptical, but it's done very very well. There is no question that they wouldn't do well in Delhi or Bombay. According to Swetha, they have foreign customers who buy many products, but they do not have the infrastructure to carry the links further.

8. Charaka and Growth

For most cooperatives, the missionary zeal of its founders drives its functioning in the initial years. With the growth of the cooperative, and the scaling-up that it entails, there are bound to be changes. Today, Charaka has grown from one amorphous organization to a more structured one, where there are different units and unit heads, bringing with it new set of problems related to scale and growth.

Bhagirathi talks very fondly of how she was involved with the 'society' right from the beginning. She is also very clear on how the founding members and Prasanna worked tirelessly to make the organization reach where it is today. Bhagirathi however has misgivings about the "decentralization" that is happening in Charaka, with growth. This has impaired the co-ordination among the different units, according to her. The people in the weaving unit, for example, did not have much idea about what was going on in the tailoring unit. Neither did individual Department heads like being questioned by other departments, she felt. Younger and inexperienced members were being elected as directors in the Board and she felt that they were not clued-in to the history of Charaka or of the tribulations of the founder members to set this up. To her, that meant the newer members were not as committed to "Charaka and its Cause". To them it was like any other job, with attendant demands for over-time dues, re-imbusement for travel et.al. Bhagirathi feels that the newcomers do not have the same level of commitment to the organisation. Since each department now has its own head and functions independently and the department heads don't always like it when someone from another department questions them or their activities. She finds this rather disturbing as she is someone who has been involved in every aspect of the Charaka – starting out as a tailor and then going on to head th marketing department. She recalls how she carried bundles of cloth on her head as she went from exhibiton to exhibition selling the products – however some of the staff now ask for over-time for working extra hours. If they have to carry material from the unit to the show room (in Heggodu) they ask for transport to be paid.

Mahalakshmi feels that the earlier system (when there were no clear cut departments) was good. When asked why she thought so she replied that then there were fewer people and everybody knew each other very well. Now, each one doesn't know what is going on in the other department though things are more systematic and each person's role is well defined. However she was quick to point out that when an organisation grows, this is inevitable. It is

difficult for one person or a few persons to take on all responsibilities and hence such systems are essential.

With growth and need for meeting production targets, there has also been a change in the training of the newer members. Madhura stated that she did all the work here when she joined Charaka - shrinking, ironing, cutting. As per the rules then, she worked in every department. At that time, that is what the 6-month training entailed. Now people are trained in their particular job right away, so if someone joins as a tailor, she is trained in tailoring alone and immediately assigned to the tailoring department. There are fixed people in each department. She felt both systems (the earlier one of training a person in all activities as well as the current one) are good. However, her views on the present system were different from those of Bhagirathi.

Five years ago, it was not so free. Now the new staff and older staff are all the same. When we were new, the senior staff maintained a distance, now it is not so. Many educated people have joined, they started saying that this is not right so nobody does that anymore [keeping aloof, etc.] At that time, a few of the seniors treated the juniors like they don't know anything, they don't know the work [they acted superior]. Now no one does that.

But she said that the atmosphere today being freer has its perils.

When it is so free like this, no one listens, they think they can do whatever they want. Those who advise continue to advise but some people continue to behave as they wish. That is how it is. Everyone watches TV these days and they want to behave like that.

According to Dakshayani the senior members have tremendous experience and they have been responsible for the growth of the organisation. They have developed it to this extent.

Now if someone like me comes along and tries to do certain things, in a certain way just because I am educated, that will hurt them. So we have to look at things like that.

Dakshayani also said that when they interview people for jobs, they look for people who are sensitive to such issues. So they have to take into account such things and adjust accordingly.

Earlier we were not particular about education. But now we hire people who have degree, B.Com. etc. We tell them the rules of this organisation. Those who come here should not have ideas of superiority.

According to Ganapathi, it is a fact that the newer members of the cooperative do not know the history of the organisation. However according to him, there is a dilemma in choosing between experience and qualifications while nominating persons for senior management posts. For example someone like Gouramma is very senior, however he feels she is not educated and hence cannot be appointed to senior management posts. But he also said that

they cannot ignore seniors either, hence there can't be very strict rules, else only rules will survive.

Just because new comers are educated doesn't mean that they occupy senior positions. An educated child of illiterate parents cannot ignore them. Even if he (the child) is well educated, can speak English and has travelled abroad, the parents are still his parents. Hence new comers will always be new comers and "must know their place". However, the new comers who have come to Charaka have also adjusted well, as they come mentally prepared.

On the issue of senior members, it is worth recounting Mohan's views. Mohan has voluntarily 'retired' from active work with Charaka. He continues to be a trustee with Desi. He had no reason to leave Desi. He says they would have let him continue working for another ten years if he wished. But he has a principle – that he should not be a burden on anybody.

The organisation has looked after me all these years. We have to show our gratitude to the organisation by making way for new people. Even the government has rules for retirement, say at the age of 60 or 55 or 45, we have to retire at a certain age and make way for new people, that is my intention. I will go if my services are really needed. Besides, those women there draw monthly salaries of 1500, 2000 etc. Why should I go there and snatch away around Rs.4000/-, that is not right. I might be wrong, I don't know.

Chandrakala on the other hand, reiterated that senior members should continue to stay on and support the organisation; they should continue to have the same pride and attitude towards Charaka that they had in the beginning. She was perceptive enough to gauge the cause of this tension between the senior and junior members that arises when a cooperative grows.

Sometimes there are conflicts between seniors and juniors. All problems crop up when there are no sales and hence fewer profit.

Padmashree has worked in the garment units at Bangalore, but still feels that she has learnt a lot from the seniors here. She has especially learnt from the tailor, Sundar Master. According to her, he just has to see a design once to learn it, so he tells her how to make patterns and she is learning from him.

With growth, formal systems also need to be put in place. Shweta has been trying to put systems in place at Charaka. According to Swetha, Charaka is probably only one of its kind where all processes happen at one unit. She feels that a major problem with Charaka is that there is no documentation. In each dept., they are trying to standardise it. In the dyeing unit, they are documenting the processes – so that when a new recruit joins he is able to pick up the job immediately by reading it.

It could be basic instructions like 'put so much yarn in so much water and put it to hang for so much time'.

Padmashree has been given the freedom to implement these changes. She has introduced the system of order copy. Earlier only the production manager had a copy of the order. The marketing department would orally tell them. But now every body gets a copy of the order. Both the production department and the cutting department have a copy of the order, so even if one of them makes a mistake in size the other can rectify it. According to Padmashree, there is less wastage now as the production is as per the written orders.

She is however clear that they cannot adopt all formal systems here. There are practical problems here. For instance, certain colours cannot dyed immediately. In the rainy season the yarn and fabric don't dye. There are frequent power cuts causing delays. There are many such practical problems here, and Padmashree says we have to keep that in mind and make small changes.

Gauramma who was the first president of the Society recollects the difficulty of the initial years. For six months the unit had to be closed because there was no money to pay the workers' wages. Those were frightening times, because no one was sure what would happen next, whether it would be possible to continue at all

There were no systems then. There are many subsidies and benefits available for such units from the ZP, the textiles department, etc. But it is very difficult to access these. Lots of bribes have to be paid to get these benefits, but so far Charaka has not paid a single paisa as bribe but has persisted in getting benefits.

Susheela has been with Charaka since its inception – she was one of the first eight women to be trained in tailoring even before Charaka was established. When she was in seventh standard she accompanied her friends who attended tailoring training at Charaka. According to Susheela, Charaka has grown a lot now, there are more people, more departments. Subsidies from the government in the earlier days helped its growth. Charaka has been able to train more and more people. Earlier there was only one building. When the new buildings were constructed, she also helped in construction by clearing the ground, carrying bricks. Now, she says no one will do all that (if the new members were asked to do it that is).

Susheela comes from a poor family and needs the money. She has joined an SHG within Charaka and has taken loans for buying gold. Her husband (she got married nine months ago) wants her to leave as the daily commute from Sagar is taxing. She wants to continue working till she finishes repaying a loan that she has taken. Talking about Charaka's shift from being a poor person's workplace, Susheela says,

In the earlier days there were not many takers for the training course or for jobs at Charaka. In those days rich people were not recruited so people looked down upon on Charaka [as a poor person's place]. However now even rich people are joining. Now, anybody can submit an application and join. There is no need to call anyone to apply. Now many people are full of praise for Charaka. While earlier the rich used to look down upon Charaka, now because it has got fame, they are sending their daughters to work here.

Kavitha, who has studied till SSLC has many of her school mates working here.

Some of my friends who have finished their graduation say they want to join Charaka. I tell them not join. That is because they are so well educated, they can get any other job. There are others who are not so well educated, who are poor, let them come and join Charaka, let them get an opportunity to work.

Madhura, the head of the cutting departments and who is one of the few graduates working at Charaka and when we asked her about what she felt working at Charaka, she said she didn't feel bad about it.

I don't feel bad or anything, I do my work happily. Some people did say, 'You are a graduate and you are working here, don't you feel like working outside [cities] ?' But what to do? Now it is not possible to go outside either. Education is very costly, besides now it is not possible to get jobs either, people pay money to get jobs. That is what they say. So I decided wherever one goes, one has to work, so it doesn't matter what work it is, [I am] ready to do whatever work there is with peace and happiness.

According to Ganapathi, while recruiting earlier, it was ensured that only poor people got jobs here, however over the past two years, well-off persons have also started applying. Earlier havyakas (Brahmins) never applied for jobs, it was known in this area that this place does not hire Brahmins. But now they have started working here. Naturally according to him, they prefer to do the easier kinds of work like embroidery and not hard work such as dyeing or ironing.

Now there are people who come from 8km away in Omni cars and scooties to take piece work for embroidery. They earn a mere Rs.150/- or so but they are willing to come for such work. Some people perhaps work not for money but for name (fame).

As a production manager, Rudranna oversees all the post-loom activities. He has to constantly think about increasing production, which is not easy since there are a lot of work processes involved with the making of a kurta. However, he agrees that it is because of this, Charaka is able to provide jobs on such a large scale to the rural women. There is however scope for further increase in production. Production has been increasing in the past years – this year however, has seen a 10 percent dip in the sales. Therefore, the focus has to shift on quality control. Production at Charaka will be bound with certain constraints. Being in a heavy monsoon area, weaving, dyeing and shrinkage will be a problem in monsoon.

Firewood is costly and they cannot use a drier. Charaka believes in using natural dyes, but use of natural dyes will cause uneven dyeing. Seasonal problems will persist and there will be seasonal drops in production. Therefore, according to Rudranna, the focus should also shift to product diversification, on using waste pieces and making bags, purses and quilts.

According to Rudranna, Charaka cannot become completely commercial and yet they need to increase production and find more markets if more people are to be provided employment. Rudranna feels it is difficult to cut production costs because of the many processes involved in each production activity. Charaka cannot aspire for very handsome profits – it needs to provide employment and a decent wage to as many people as possible and run without a loss. For him, provision of livelihoods is the reason Charaka exists. There is no compromise where provision of employment and welfare of labour is concerned. Therefore his vision for the growth of Charaka and personal growth hinges on this. Profits should be just enough to meet worker payments and benefits. People should not be made to work like machines. Work conditions need to be humane, for instance most workers are women and most of them find it difficult to work (weaving, stitching) when they are menstruating. These factors need to be considered, and yet production cannot be compromised.

For this reason according to Bhagirathi,

Who ever does the market study, or however much it is done, it is never enough.

Chadrakala, one of the senior board members of Charaka put it in perspective.

When there is a market, there is money and there are no problems. If work slows down for even a month, people turn dull.

Chandrakala wishes for Charaka to grow and provide employment to more people. Her worry for Charaka is more because it is a place that provides employment to women; men she feels have enough opportunities for growth, women find it difficult and hence all the more reason to ensure that organisations such as this continue to function well.

Another problem is with piece work payments. At times when there is no work, it is difficult to handle. During monsoons, in the dyeing unit, workers were not paid adequate wages because there wasn't enough work – so the men demanded to be paid a monthly salary. Being a salaried member herself, Chandrakala says that she finds it difficult to turn down such a request. However it is not a request that can be accepted either because then everyone will have to be paid a monthly wage regardless of whether or not there is work. Piece rate payments are also seasonal – in the rainy season when there is less work their pay is less. At such times it is natural for them to question the monthly salaries drawn by people in the management, QC departments. She feels it is best to pay workers on a piece rate basis. There is no need to supervise workers under this system;

People who draw a monthly salary may while away time. In the 10-5 minutes that a person whiles away over tea, a tailor can stitch a jubba.

Except for staff in the administrative, stores, cutting, printing and QC department, all others are paid on a piece rate basis. She herself prefers a piece rate payment because it is possible to work more and earn more. Monthly payments for people in departments like hers are limited and quite low. The piece-rate payments are also decided keeping in mind the holidays and the slack season.

With growth, Charaka also has to grapple with issues of cost cutting. Chandrakala had the following to say on the cost cutting issues at Charaka,

Operational costs are considerable because the units are spread over so many locations. There are too many costs associated with one jubba and neither can they be priced lower – since they have certain standards to meet. (One of the ex-trainers – Anjanappa is able to sell cheaper jubbas by using chemical dyes).

There was also the issue of increasing the productivity of the members and talking to Chandrakala, we also realised how all these issues are intertwined. Productivity was linked to the kind of people joining Charaka,

In spite of all these facilities (facilities are increasing now as compared to earlier) people don't work very well, i.e. productivity is rather low. There are weavers who hardly weave 8 mts a day. The reason that some people don't work so well is that they don't have such a pressing need for livelihood. There are people who have some lands and are not wholly dependent on the income from Charaka. Such people tend to have low productivity levels, i.e. they do not make any efforts to work at optimum levels and earn since they do not need the money so much.

For Mahalakshmi, as with everyone else at Charaka, worker welfare was a big concern. Being a senior member, she was aware of the changes that were taking place with the growth of Charaka. She said that she would like to cut maintenance and management costs. The flip side of having different units was that looms are scattered over several places and it takes a lot of time and money to transport the warped beams to the looms, bring the looms over for any repairs or if the carpenter has to travel from loom to loom to carry out repairs. She feels there should be systems for repairs/warping etc at each unit. The bottomline according to her,

The only way for Charaka to grow is to increase production.

Formalization of processes is a constant challenge with growth. She also feels the need for a better system of accounts and stock keeping. Currently there are many audit objections that they face because they are not able to follow all the rules of the cooperative department. Apart from that, she finds it difficult to keep proper track of the various items that her department handles – for example, thread, woven fabric, dyes. She has to refer to many

different books to keep track of various items and would like all stock to be maintained in one book. She wishes for more transparency in accounting systems (a system that shines like a mirror) and also more simplicity so that every one can understand.

According to Dakshayani,

This organisation must grow much more; the administration needs to be strengthened further. And the projects that they have taken up now, cluster, exports, they need to take up more of such projects. We need more educated people amongst us. That has become a problem for us, the gap between the educated and those who are not.

According to Ganapathi too, Charaka needs to develop further. Married women need to be hired and their skills developed. Only then will the organisation have a future. When unmarried girls join, they are trained, work for about 5 years and then they leave.

On this issue of the constant flux of employees leaving due to marriage, Mohan feels it is not such a big problem. As people keep leaving, new people have to be ready to join. To do that they are organising continuous training programmes. Padmashree – the designer with Charaka, feels it could be difficult. They are well trained and new comers take at least 2 months to learn, in the tailoring department it is two months, in the loom department it takes even longer because weaving is difficult. So production will certainly get affected. But she feels they cannot do much about it because after all, this is a women's Society.

Lastly, senior members expressed doubts about Charaka's future in the absence of Prasanna's guidance. Bhagirathi, the head of the marketing division feels that decisions regarding strategies, future directions they are still dependant on him.

We don't go ahead and do anything on our own. We go ahead only after he (Prasanna) tells us.

Chandrakala, a senior member and currently on the Board of Directors feels some kind of fear when she thinks of Charaka's future.

Now we have a very good system, things are tightly controlled, no body can appropriate even a paisa, nor is anyone here like that. But how long will it continue?

Chandrakala is also worried about Charaka's future after Prasanna. There is also the question of who will continue to provide the kind of guidance that Prasanna does.

Kavita, in her simple, lucid way put it thus,

Charaka must be improved. All people must work with the same dedication. There are some people who work only because they are paid a salary, they are not very much interested in the work as such. We should work hard, we should do justice to the salary that we are paid. It should not be that we just draw our salary and go away at the end of the day. Even if we leave the organisation, others will join

in our place, they too should lead good lives. They should also feel that their lives have improved because of Charaka. Our Charaka should sustain till the end.

Appendix

Figure 1 - Processes involved in making the Jubba.

Yarn is purchased from mill → Dying of yarn using natural dyes prepared at Charaka → Dyed yarn is woven by weavers → Woven fabric is pre-shrunk → Shrunk fabric is checked for quality (defects in weaving, etc.) → It is then ironed → Ironed fabric is sent to the tailoring department where it is stitched → Stitched jubbas come to the quality check department for checks; defective pieces are sent back to the tailoring department for rectification → stitched pieces sent for ironing → ironed pieces sent to stores → marketing department despatches items as per order.

Table 1 – Departments and units at Charaka

<i>Department</i>	<i># workers</i>
Office (accounts, administration)	10
Stores	7
Dyeing	10
Cutting	18
Tailoring	41
Tailoring (work from home tailors)	13
Marketing	9
Quality control	4
Ironing	8
Canteen	3
Cleaning	3
Security guards	3
Shrinking	4
Carpenters	3
Printing	6
Embroidery (including those who work from home)	6
Bobbin	13
Achu Mechu (weavers, doli winders, bobbin reelers, trainers)	24
<i>Weavers in other villages near Heggodu</i>	
Othigodu	7
Purappemane	8

Ragihakkalu	9
At home	3
Handigoodu	5
Moorkai	10
Charaka	5
Bandagadde	4
Total	236

Table 2 – Weaving Outsourced by Charaka.

Name of the organisation/person	Place	Number of weavers	No. Of metres supplied per month
<i>Adishakthi Kaimagga Nekaarara Vividhodesha Swa Sahaya Sangha Vishwanath</i>	Gajendragarh	10	2500
Shivashankar E. Moodalgi	Mahalingpur	10	2000
Babanna	Jagalur	10	1000-1500
Chandrashekhar	Davangere	5	500
	Total	35	6500

Table 3 - The Board members as of July 2009.

1. Gayathri – President [Cutting]
2. Chandrakala – Director [Office]
3. Mahalakshmi – Director [Weaving]
4. Pavithra – Director [stores]
5. Madhura – Director [Tailoring]
6. Geeta – Director [Weaving]
7. Amita – Director [Weaving – Othigodu]
8. Prema – Director [Dyeing]
9. Dakshayani – Secretary

[The President’s post is reserved for workers belonging to the Scheduled Caste.]

Table 4 – Management Committee at Charaka.

1. General Manager – overall managerial supervision
2. Head of the Marketing department
3. Head of the Weaving department
4. Head of the Tailoring department
5. Head of the Dyeing Department
6. Head of the Production department – he coordinates the overall production processes and weavers tailors in the villages around Heggodu report to him.
7. Secretary of the Society

Table 5 – Independent Units run by Charaka staff.

Name of unit	# workers	Products
Ambara Chittara (by Kulkarni, the dyeing master)	14	Ready made garments (Printing, embroidery, stitching)
Shylee (by Sundar, the master tailor)	6	Coats (Stitching)
Vastra Vinyaasa (by Rudranna, production manager)	7	Readymade garments (stitching)