

WHEN WOMEN UNITED: ANTI- ARRACK CAMPAIGN IN NELLORE DISTRICT

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Abstract

The consumption of liquor is considered as a vice as per the Hindu Canon. Due to the men's growing consumption of liquor, the womenfolk had suffered a lot. In 1991 women from Dubagunta, Nellore District in Andhra Pradesh drove the liquor contractors out of their village. The women chose to stop the sale of liquor by attacking the shops and above all the local *godown*. This is said to have been the beginning of the so-called Anti-Arrack Movement (*Saara Vyathireka Udyamam*), which finally led to the prohibition of alcohol in the state on 16 January 1995. It has generally been assumed that the local state administration, the literacy campaign and the newspaper *Eenadu* were the key factors behind the spread of the movement to other parts of Andhra Pradesh. Drinking of arrack or toddy by schedule castes does not carry any social stigma. In fact, the women who are protesting against arrack are not faceless poor but mostly scheduled caste women who are the direct sufferers. The main participants in the early struggle were poor, rural women, predominantly from Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes supported by voluntary organizations and later on by politicians from the opposition parties. The study focuses the process whereby the political and private endeavours of individuals were integrated into a broader social movement. It also discusses discourses on gender and household relations in rural Andhra Pradesh and the involvement of urban activists as organizers, leaders and translators of the struggle in Nellore District.

Key Word: Scheduled Castes, Backward Classes, Broader social movement, Hindu Canon, Nellore District

Introduction

The consumption of alcohol is considered as a social evil as per the Hindu canon. Arrack when regularly consumed spoil naturally the health and wealth of the consumer. Generally men are being easily addicted to this vice. Due to the growing consumption of liquor among men, the

womenfolk had suffered a lot especially in Dubagunta, Ayyavaripalli, Saipeta, Bukkapuram and Chintala Palem in Nellore district. In these villages men and women went to work early in the morning every day to eke their livelihood. But the earning was of no avail as the men went straight to the arrack shop in the evening to spend all of their hard-earned money on either toddy or arrack. Some of them even borrowed money from others and most frequently come to home hardly with any money in their pockets. When the men folk do not have money to consume the alcoholic beverages, they did not hesitate to sell away the household utensils and other necessary items that fetches them liquor. They did not hesitate to steal the household articles like goblets, plates or even their wives' saris. Apart from drinking they abuse their wives, pick up quarrels with them and even beat their companions and children making the home as a veritable hell to the women folk. Some of the drunkards even assaulted publicly their wives without any shame making the day-to-day life miserable.

Needless to say, most of the people affected were agricultural workers from scheduled castes, and Backward caste for drinking is a social taboo for many upper castes. In some villages in Andhra, the addiction rate was up to 90 percent among the male population and although it sounds bizarre, that in many places the wages were even directly 'paid' in arrack¹. Many of the participants in the agitation against arrack were poor, rural women, mainly from Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes. The movement has been described as spontaneous, which may be true in so far as there was initially no coordination of activities when people mobilized in separate places under the slogan² 'we don't want arrack in our village' (*maa uuriki saaraa waddu*).

A climax was reached when one man in an intoxicated condition stabbed his own father to death in Saipet. Apart from this incident, Vijayamma one of the activists mentioned how she was embarrassed when her relatives visited the house and how to her shame they were scared and fled away from the village by the obscene language of her neighbour who was a hard drinker. She felt ashamed and thought that Saipeta and its neighbouring villages would be much better places without the evil of arrack.

Every day the women folk in these villages pray gods for the removal of their worries, but none responded to their supplications. Fortunately literacy campaign was started in 1991 in the villages. This campaign gave an opportunity for them to unite and fight against the demon of arrack. The above said reasons are responsible to start this anti- arrack movement in Nellore district.

Beginning of Anti -Arrack Movement

There is consensus that in Dubagunta, a small village some 80 km from Nellore town, the women decided to stop the vending of arrack and thus became the prototype for that which followed. But there are at least two versions about exactly how and why the decision was taken; one maintains that it happened because two men had died after a drinking another talks about a preparatory meeting in the context of a literacy campaign,³ where two drunken men insulted some officials who visited the village. In reaction the women present forced the men to leave and decided to attend the literacy classes. One of the primers used in these classes contained a story where the wife of an alcoholic committed suicide after she failed to reform her husband. The women were very moved by the story and vowed to fight alcoholism; as a consequence they closed down the arrack shop in their village.⁴

Whichever version is true, the successful struggle of the women in Dubagunta soon found its way into reading material, whether primers or newspapers, and initiated discussions and action at other places. The next major occurrence took place at Saipet, where a drunken man stabbed his father. The women stopped the trade of alcohol in their village and staged a demonstration against arrack in Kavali, the second largest town in Nellore district. This too found its way into the news and soon became the topic of the day in many villages in the district.⁵

Nellore mass movement (Anti- Arrack Co-ordination Committee)

In Nellore district the neo-literate women in the villages pledged to fight against the "arrack-demon" in the concluding sessions of the Akshara Jyothi programme. Since then, a new momentum has been unleashed by the women. To their credit it can be said that they have converted a women's movement to a people's movement which among other issues of class and state power is equally concerned with women's question.⁶

Women United at Literacy campaign

As in other parts of the district, the literacy campaign had started in the village in 1991. The women read about the incidents at Dubagunta in the second book of study material used in the classes, which led to their bonding together to stop liquor sales in Saipet as well. The men scolded the women when they went to night school instead of staying at home, but the women managed to slip out anyhow and go to the lessons. Vijayamma informed that "we had chosen and other women in the village had encouraged us by saying that we could achieve anything if we were united." They

met and discussed the arrack problem at the literacy classes, particularly at those held in the settlements of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes as these categories suffered most from the men's abuse of alcohol.⁷ The women preferred to talk about these issues at the course in the evening, rather than meeting in their homes during the day when they were occupied with earning their livelihoods and performing their household duties. After a week's discussion they decided to send petitions to the Collector's office, to the village president and to Ravula Ankaiah Goud one of the big arrack contractors in the district, which was responsible for the distribution of intoxicating beverages to Saipet.

Women protest in front of Arrack godown and shops

The women chose to stop the sale of liquor by attacking the shops and above all the local *godown*. Whenever the shopkeepers needed arrack they would open the store, take out the goods, and then lock it up again. Two hundred villagers gathered outside the storage point when the new spirits arrived. The workers were trying to unload the goods but the women prevented them, urging the sellers to leave the place with all the arrack. While the traders insisted on unloading, as they had not received any other orders from above, the women told them that this was their village, where the villagers had authority.⁸ 'We won't allow you to drop off the beverages and if you want you can make a complaint against us'. With such words they forcibly obstructed the traders who finally agreed to their demands but with the reservation that the women should leave the stock untouched until the contractor arrived. The protesters agreed and the sellers stopped unloading, telling the villagers that they would return the next day. They left in a jeep after having been warned by the women that if they did not turn up the following day, the women would break into the store and throw out the goods.

The arrack contractor arrived four days later, telling the villagers that their way of protesting was not proper and that they should rather go to the Collector in Nellore town, the district capital, and obtain a mandate from him to stop the liquor sale. Since the contractor was paying excise duties to the government he was entitled to carry on his business as long as the state representatives did not give orders to the contrary. Nevertheless, the arrack trader promised to remove all the stock on the very day that he received such instructions from the Collector.

Role of Eenadu News paper and other books

The most extensive documentation of all local events can be found in *Eenadu*, a Telugu newspaper which published daily reports from the villages and about the people involved in the anti-arrack

movement. Apart from that, two smaller books⁹ and a small range of articles sum up and interpret the story of the movement.

Anti-Arrack Solidarity Committee (*Saara Vyathireka Sangheebhava Samithi*)

Middle-class and urban people also quickly took an interest in the upsurge of protest activities in the rural areas. On 15 August 1992 the Anti-Arrack Solidarity Committee (*Saara Vyathireka Sangheebhava Samithi*)¹⁰ was formed at district level, with the lawyer Ananta Ramaiah as president, its aim being to express solidarity with the movement and to provide legal aid when necessary.

Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee (*Saara Vyathireka Samanwaya Samithi*)

A few days later, on 23 August, the Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee (*Saara Vyathireka Samanwaya Samithi*)¹¹ was formed, consisting of 30 voluntary organizations that supported the struggle, including ‘M-L groups’, i.e. those sympathizing with the Naxalite Movement (CPI-ML). Dr Vijaya Kumar from the JVV *Jana Vignan Vedika* (People’s Science Forum) was elected convenor of the committee.

Role of Jana Vignan Vedika

This means that the members of the JVV (*Jana Vignan Vedika*) came to play a leading role in organizing protests against arrack¹² in Nellore District. The turning point was a district conference of the organization held at the town of Udayagiri in the western part of the district, at which 2,000 women from different villages unexpectedly turned up to demand that the JVV side with them in their struggle against arrack. In fact, representatives of the organisation found that this meeting contributed to their becoming directly involved in the movement instead of merely supporting it.

Turned into translocal movement

The growth of activism at this time was palpable in protest endeavours on a large scale: sit down- strikes at public places (*dharnas*), demonstrations, public meetings, collection of signatures from villagers etc. As slogan of the movement was no longer ‘we don’t want arrack in our village’ but instead ‘we don’t want arrack in other villages’ (*mii uuriki saaraa waddu*) a village protest turned into a translocal movement. There are estimations that within the three months the agitation spread to 50 villages in the district and after another two months 600 villages has involved in the

struggle¹³ After sometime a gap developed within the coordination committee between the ‘ML groups’ and the rest on whether to cooperate with the state or to use violent methods.

Auctioning of Arrack

On 11 September 1992 a demonstration and a public meeting against the auctioning of arrack (*saaraa weelampaaTalu*) were held in Nellore town at which 50,000 people turned up.¹⁴ The Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee organized a peaceful march in the town, while two ‘ML-groups’ *Rythu Kuli Sangam* (Agricultural Workers’ Committee) and PDSU (Progressive Democratic Students’ Union) — began an attack on the auction grounds at the A.C. Subba Reddy Stadium itself, supported by the Progressive Organization of Women-*Stree Vimukthi*. Both groups succeeded in their intentions as the sales of arrack were postponed to the next day because of the protests. That day, however, the coordination committee also participated in the storming of the stadium. Mr E.V.S. Naidu, a man from the board, described how the activists attacked the barricades on this day.

Women’s United Forum for the Prohibition of Arrack (*Saara Nischeda Aikya Mahila Vedika*),

While the temperance activities spread to other parts of Andhra Pradesh, a networking body was formed at Hyderabad, the Women’s United Forum for the Prohibition of Arrack¹⁵ (*Saara Nischeda Aikya Mahila Vedika*) on 28 September 1992, with representatives from the women’s wings of the opposition parties as well as from autonomous organizations.¹⁶ Although the JVV had been active in the protests in Nellore district the association did not become a member of the state federation that was dominated numerically by groups from the state capital.¹⁷

All-Party Committee (Akhila Paksha Committee)

In Nellore attacks on the stadium continued until midnight on 30 September when the government was forced to put an end to the auctions for an indefinite period. Instead, arrack was sold directly by the state, sometimes in secret through police officers and excise officials. This was a critical moment in the history of the movement, as government officials and the armed gangs (*gundas*) of the contractors started to use violence against the participants. Concurrently local politicians entered the struggle more openly, and in October 1992 the All-Party Committee (*Akhila Paksha Committee*), consisting of all the political parties except the ruling Congress, was formed in Nellore. The committee cooperated with the non-political body referred to above, but also

organized certain activities independently, for example, a demonstration march¹⁸ (*padayatra*) covering 120 kilometres.

Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee demonstration march (*padayatra*)

With the purpose of uniting the villagers in the district against repression from the police and armed gangs, the Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee in Nellore organized a demonstration march (*padayatra*) covering hundreds of kilometres between 2 and 19 December.¹⁹ Many people from voluntary organizations have emphasized the uniqueness of the march, their feelings of togetherness during the hardships of the journey and the enthusiastic response of villagers. The walk had already started when Hindu fundamentalist groups destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, resulting in violent confrontations between Muslims and Hindus all over India including the old city of Hyderabad. Nevertheless, in Nellore women from these groups joined hands as they welcomed people from the *padayatra* troupes into their villages.

Ban on arrack

Finally on 15 April 1993 the government gave in to the pressures of the campaign by prohibiting the sale and consumption of arrack in the district. The temperance agitation continued, however, in other parts of Andhra Pradesh with the consequence that a ban on arrack was established throughout the state from 1 October 1993.

Cheap Liquor

Even if arrack was prohibited, other forms of liquor were still available. Significantly, the government introduced 'Cheap Liquor', consisting of intoxicating beverages produced from distilled but not properly purified spirit and sold at much lower prices than other Indian-Made Foreign Liquor. According to many activists, 'Cheap Liquor' was nothing but 'coloured arrack'.

Indian Made Foreign Liquor

The movement for prohibition continued, but now turned against Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) as the number of outlets had increased all over the state including Nellore. Since this campaign was more urban and organized in character, fewer people participated during this phase compared with the earlier anti-arrack protests. Indian-Made Foreign Liquor was more a problem for urban middle-class women, who were thought unlikely to leave their houses to walk out in the street en masse. In Nellore district, agitation against shops selling spirits began in the eastern part of

Nellore town under the leadership of Seturami Reddy, and spread to the entire area in January 1994.²⁰

Election Campaign in 1994- 1995

The months of December 1994 and January 1995 were characterized by the election campaign for the State Legislative Assembly in which the alcohol question played a major role. In fact, all parties had total prohibition on their agendas quoting the ideas of Gandhi and his demand for a ban on hard drinks. Conversely, it was the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) under the leadership of N.T.Rama Rao that had campaigned for a liquor prohibition already at an earlier stage. On 12 December 1994 it was declared that the Congress Party had lost power in the state and that the TDP had won the elections. After assuming the presidency the party introduced a total prohibition on 16 January 1995. Interestingly enough, toddy had been excluded from the ban, due to the fact that it was not assumed to be an alcoholic drink and that many poor toddy tappers depended entirely on the manufacture and sale of toddy for their livelihood,

Anti-Liquor Coordination Committee (*Madya Vyathireka SamanwayaSamithi*)

The total prohibition on liquor, the Anti-Arrack Coordination Committee in Nellore district changed its name to the Anti-Liquor Coordination Committee (Madya Vyathireka Samanwaya Samithi) at the same time as it extended its membership from 30 to 50 together with an increase in the percentage of women.²¹ The enlargement of the committee was an attempt to control the growing smuggling of inebriants within the urban areas. Moreover, Mr Rama Gopal from the All India Lawyers Union replaced Dr Vijaya Kumar as a convenor of the committee after the latter had decided to return to his ordinary work as a doctor. Despite these changes, the JVV still held a leading position within the body. In the aftermath of the alcohol proscription, the temperance movement became organizationally very weak and more urban in its character as many rural people had now calmed down and were leaving the responsibility to the state.

After Chandra Babu Naidu replaced Rama Rao as Chief Minister rumours grew that the prohibition would be lifted in view of the financial crises of the state. In Nellore district the women once again left their villages to participate in meetings and demonstrations organized by the Anti Liquor Coordination Committee. Due to the extensive protests all over the state, the Chief Minister was forced to announce that the ban would be continued.

Conclusion

Banning of arrack that does not come to an end the duty of the Government, which gives guarantee to the poor people. They would meet out their expenditure and towards other domestic items like food, clothing, children's education, etc that would improve the standard of living of the entire household. Several studies have revealed that a mere ban on arrack would not bring about the desired results if it is not accompanied by a similar ban and strict enforcement of laws on relating to illicit liquor, matka, gutka, panparg, single number game, drugs, etc, the poorer households lives are highly vulnerable. The Government have to take steps for searching alternative arrangements to provide income to the exchequer. For the sake of income the government should not introduce liquor, if the government lift the ban on liquor the people health and wealth deteriorated.

References

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4. Pande, R. *From Anti- Arrack to total prohibition: The women's Movement in Andhra Pradesh, India*, Gender Technology and Development, 2000, pp. 133. Shatrugna, M. Literacy and Arrack in Andhra Pradesh, *Economic and Political weekly* 2748, 1992, p. 2643
5. Balagopal, K. *opp cit*, p. 2460.
6. D. Narasimha Reddy and Arun Patnaik, *opp cit* p. 1065.
7. The classifications, Scheduled Castes (S.C.) and Backward Classes (B.C.) or actually Other Backward Classes, (O.B.C.) have been introduced by the Indian government with the aim of giving persons belonging to these groups a certain percentage of educational places and jobs within the state sector. The label, Scheduled Castes, was first applied in 1935, when disadvantaged groups were placed on a schedule to obtain access to reserved places. Despite the fact that most of the people embraced were customarily viewed as 'untouchables', not everyone included in the register actually belongs to these castes (Hardtmann 2003:1 n.1). In addition, the Kakar Kalelkar Commission, established by the Government of India, recognized more than 3,000 castes and communities as 'Other Backward Classes' (Castes) in 1956. While the Mandal Commission considered that 52% of the inhabitants should be incorporated under

this label in 1980, several state governments have set up commissions to classify those castes that can be described as ‘socially and educationally backward castes/classes’ (Shah 1990:122). Despite the fact that other Backward Classes usually consist of people included in the Sudra category according to the four broad ‘social classes’ in the traditional varna scheme, i.e. they are not ‘twice-born’, not all Sudra groups are on the list. For example, Reddis and Kammas, the influential landowning castes of Andhra Pradesh, are not included.

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9. Bandila, R.K. & Sailaja, N. 1997. *The Women Rouse: An Overview of Anti-Arrack Movement in Andhra Pradesh*. Visakhapatnam: Andhra University, Series no. 216. Sarveswara Rao, B. & Parthasarathy, G. eds. 1997. *Anti-Arrack Movement of Women in Andhra Pradesh and Prohibition Policy*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
10. Marie Larison, *opp. cit.*, p. 73.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Afterwards the JVV arranged a meeting for its members at which they decided that those who were ready to face the problems would join the agitation against arrack.
13. Marie Larison, *opp. cit.*, p. 73.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
15. A month later, on 12 October, various intellectuals had established a solidarity committee in Hyderabad, the Anti-Arrack Women’s Movement Solidarity Committee, with Mr Kaloji Narayana Rao, Mr B. Tarakam, Ms V. Olga and Ms K. Lalitha as convenors. The body issued various statements, including the condemnation of the government’s practice of earning money through revenue from liquor that would lead to the ruin of the economy and the end of social harmony in many poor families. Moreover, some of its members travelled to the villages with the aim of expressing its support by studying and spreading knowledge about the movement (see, for example, John, M et al. 1993; Olga, V., Kannabiran, K. & V.Kannabiran 1994; Ilaiah 1992).
16. The party-affiliated women’s associations consisted of, for example, Telugu Mahila Desam Bhagyam (of the Telugu Desam Party), Andhra Pradesh Mahila Sangham (Andhra Pradesh Women’s Society of the Communist Party of India - Marxist), and Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya (Andhra Pradesh Women’s Federation of the Communist Party of India). In addition, POW (Progressive Organization of Women) — a women’s group on the extreme left with links to CPI (ML) — as well as autonomous women’s organizations were included in the body.
17. In fact, the state-level body lacked a continuous structure, and for a while there existed two networking coalitions: i.e. the committee referred to above and the Women’s United Forum for

Total Prohibition (Sampoorna Madhya Nischeda Mahila Aikya Vedika) consisting of various voluntary organizations and individuals, with Malladi Subbamma as president.

18. Marie Larison, *opp. cit.*, p. 76.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

21. The members of the committee consisted of representatives from various voluntary organizations and NGOs but also a few eminent persons who were not associated with any group.