

Slaying of a Spirituous Demon

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Hitherto geographically and politically renjote places have moved to the centre of political discussion in Andhra Pradesh in the last two months. The context is the anti-arack agitation that is shaking the state, upsetting complacent notions about the political apathy of the suffering masses and the inability of women to take their future into their hands without male leadership.

*Liquor mafia take to heels
as women hit back*

Kalikiri, October 28.

In the village of Gundlur in Kalikin Mandal of Chittoor district, on Wednesday, women who prevented the sale of arrack were assaulted by arrack contractor's goondas with iron rods and other lethal weapons. But when the women resisted the assault unitedly, the hired mafia took to their heels. The women later destroyed three jeeps.

The details:

About a week ago the women of Gundlur assembled and resolved to put an end to the sale of arrack in their village. They conveyed this resolution to the village arrack vendor. They turned back the jeep that brought arrack packets into the village. However, when the village arrack vendor informed the contractor about this, the contractor sent him a gang of persons in aid and told him to resume sales. The women resisted the reopening of sales and the contractor's men went away to bring the police. But the women were adamant and the police had to beat a retreat.

In this background, on Tuesday, the vendor resumed sales of arrack in the village. The women came to know of this and raided the shop and threw twenty litres of the liquor on to the ground. The vendor then went to the contractor and told him that he was in no position to sell the liquor in the village. The enraged contractor sent goondas in five jeeps to Gundlur the next day. They raided the village and raised hell with sticks, iron rods, country-made bombs and two guns. They entered houses and pulled women out by the hair. They beat them and showered obscenities on them. As all the men of the village had gone to a fair at the neighbouring village, there was no aid to the women. Seeing the men absent the goondas went on a wild rampage. The women at first could not understand why they were being attacked. When they realised the facts they decided that if they did not resist now they would be helpless in the future. They united on the spot and faced the goondas. Seeing the women light back unitedly the goondas took to their heels. They left behind the sticks and rods they had brought with them. Some of them escaped in two jeeps, and the rest ran across the fields. Seeing that the women were still chasing them, they threw a bomb and fired twice and ran. Nobody was injured. The women

later came back into the village and destroyed the three remaining jeeps. They took out the liquor packets containing ten litres of arrack from the jeeps, threw on the road and stamped upon them.

—*Eenadu*, October 29, 1992.

THIS is the kind of news item that appeared in the Telugu press almost daily during September and October, and still appears though a little less frequently these days. Kalikin is a remote mandal headquarters in remote Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. Hitherto remote not only topographically but also politically, such places have shifted fast to the centre of political discussion in the last couple of months. The context is a major anti-arack agitation that is shaking the state, upsetting complacent notions about the political apathy of the suffering masses and the inability of women to take their future into their hands without male leadership. The supreme courage and tenacity of thousands of rural women has pitted itself against the abysmal humbug of this state's rulers, and never in their unspeakably wretched history have the latter appeared such scamps as now. It is literally their stengun-toting bodyguards and encircling hoodlums that save them from being spat at when they come out these days, and so much the pity for no abusive expectation aimed at them would be wasted. The absolute vulgarity that they have reduced our public life to is epitomised by the cheap alcohol called arrack, a many-in-one fluid that is the second most important source of governmental revenue after sales tax; the principal source of non-corporate profit for the provincial rich who make more than a couple of thousand crore from its sales annually; a no longer very cheap stimulant that soothes the tired muscles of the working classes and keeps them fit to beat their wives and come back to work on the morrow; and the cheapest (in spite of being no longer very cheap) inducement for getting the votes of the poor, for

enticing the poor to join street gangs or political mafias, for hiring them to commit crimes of violence on the provider's behalf, and even for more mundane things like getting them to do day-to-day chores in the provider's house, fields, or cattle-shed without normal wage payment. For the last ten years the importance of arrack has increased steadily in the slate, right through the regime of N T Rama Rao (who is now the most vocal supporter of the anti-arack agitation) and the regimes of the Congress chief ministers who have followed (now running into the third in three years). That much more than a little drop of this obscene fluid and the blood of the poor men and women that it draws is in every rupee that is spent by the state—on welfare, on infrastructure, on professors' salaries, and on grants to soulful cultural shows—and on every rupee invested in films, in apartment building for the urban rich, in corporate enterprise that we proudly call development, and even in the funds copiously available these days for the building of temples, is a shameful fact of public life that editorial writers, speech-makers and those who philosophise in class rooms and cultural associations have kept carefully unstated all these days, and it is that sense of shame that accounts for the cathartic disgust that hitherto silent gentlemen have suddenly started expressing for arrack and all that it has entailed, now that the wretched of the wretched—the women of poor rural families who bear the physical and financial brunt of arrack—have taken up sickle and broomstick to drive the obscenity out of all our lives.

The revenue that the AP government gets from excise (on arrack as well as the more respectable liquor called Indian-made foreign liquor) has increased steadily from Rs 39 crore in 1970-71 to Rs 812 crore in 1991-92. This is not an innocent increase caused by changing life styles and habits but the consequence of a deliberate policy pursued by the government. Unwilling to collect the taxes it imposes on the urban rich, and entirely unwilling to tax the rural rich who are substantial in the state, the government has increasingly turned to liquor sales as a major source of revenue. Apart from licensing more and more wine shops (as shops that sell western varieties of liquor are popularly called), the government has deliberated planned a steady annual increase in arrack sales. Each year it plans that so many more crore rupees worth of arrack will be sold than the previous year, and manufactures and packages correspondingly larger

quantities or the fluid. The manufacture is the monopoly of the government's distilleries, and its sole-selling rights are auctioned areawise to contractors. The very purpose of the auction is to encourage arrack vendors to vie with each other to undertake to sell larger and larger quantities of the fluid and thereby pay greater rent to the government. There is no depth to which the government has not stooped in this endeavour. As an anonymous IAS officer confessed in shame to a Telugu daily in the aftermath of the recent anti-arrack agitation, the district collector who conducts the auction tempts the bidders by telling them that so many lakhs of rupees are being disbursed under rural development, tribal development or Rozgar schemes in such and such areas and therefore the contractors are guaranteed a sizeable market without much risk. The one who gets the contract is then left to decide how and at what price he sells the arrack supplied to him to realise the rent he is to pay the government, plus a profit for himself which he naturally would like to be much more than the rent. This has resulted in the setting up of more and more arrack shops in the villages and towns, bringing arrack to the door-steps, and simultaneously increasing the retail price from year to year. From being a trade that caters to the addicts, it became a campaign to create addicts. There was one arrack contractor in Cuddapah district who even used to give one boiled egg free for every two packets of liquor bought, and arranged the free services of a jeep to take home inebriated customers who have drunk themselves to a stupor at any of his shops.

Arrack consists principally of rectified spirit which is obtained by distilling fermented molasses. The whole process costs about one rupee per litre. This is sold at 950 per cent profit to the contractors for Rs 10.50, but this profit is only a small part of the total difference between the retail price of the liquor and its cost of manufacture. The contractor who takes the bid sells packets containing about 85 ml of the fluid for rupees 5 to 8, which works out a retail price of rupees 60 to 96 per litre. This enormous increase is supposed to be shared between the government and the contractor. If the contractor sells only officially supplied arrack, he would have little profit left, and both of them know this quite well. It is part of the game that the government encourages high bidding with the unstated agreement that it will turn a blind eye to any arrangement the contractor may make to supplement the official supply. Thus illicit liquor is manufactured by the contractors at not so clandestine places and sold at the official shops. The consequence is that with

vigorous sales promotion the monthly quota that the government supplies to the contractors is exhausted within a week—especially during cropping season in villages—and the rest of the time it is the illicit arrack that they sell in their officially licensed shops. Since the illicit liquor is sold at the same rate as the officially supplied liquor, and as no rent is to be paid on it, the proceeds of the illicit sales is almost all profit. As a result the total profit the contractors make in a year is many times the enormous rent the government gets from official sales, amounting to a total of about Rs 1,500 to 2,000 crore a year for all the contractors put together. And the total quantity of arrack that the working men drink is about 30 to 40 crore litres a year.

With these Rs 1,500 to 2,000 crore the arrack contractors maintain gangs of hired criminals to protect their monopoly from bootleggers who are either rival contractors or tribal and other poor communities who traditionally distil liquor at home; they also pay handsome amounts to the excise and police officials for the same reason; and the rest they spend in vulgarly ostentatious consumption as well as investment in real estate, building construction, finance, films, the press and good works such as donations to cultural and religious institutions and, most important of all, politics.

POLITICAL AND BUSINESS ELITE

If any reader has got the impression that these men are underworld criminals of ill-repute, there can be no greater misunderstanding than that. These men are the political and business elite of Andhra Pradesh. It would be very difficult to find an MLA or any other people's representative in the state who has no connection with the arrack business. And what may be called Andhra capital is penetrated so deep by the profits of the arrack business that it stinks wherever it is invested—in films, arid film or story magazines, for instance. The MLAs who represent the seven assembly segments of prime minister P V Narasimha Rao's parliamentary constituency of Nandyal are all arrack contractors, and the stink they raised to get that scholarly prime minister elected with a record-breaking margin is recent history. Indeed, Kurnool, the district of which Nandyal is a subdivision, has the unique distinction that all but one of the MLAs from the district are arrack contractors, and that too of the most murderous kind. And their godfather is Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, the latest chief minister of this benighted state.

In the beginning—that is to say, up to the end of the 70s—the arrack contrac-

tors financed politicians and took their protection. Politicians arranged compromises between contractors to ensure that they did not have to cut each other's throat. But soon the politicians decided that they might as well take over the increasingly lucrative business, since they were setting its terms anyway, while simultaneously the contractors decided that politics was no better a profession than theirs and there was no reason why they should only finance it and not actually take it over. The two modes of public life thus coalesced, and the modern breed of Andhra politicians was born. The typical member of this species owns a range of forms of property like agricultural land, civil contracts, urban real estate, formal and informal finance companies, cinema halls and hotels and perhaps even a newspaper, topped by arrack business worth a few crore every year. He is Congress when the Congress is in power, TDP when the TDP is in power, loyal when he is satisfied and dissident otherwise, but is always ready to switch sides and keeps his options open. He typically claims to be rural and frequently speaks the Bharat vs India idiom popularised by movements and ideologues who have either compromised with him or refuse to acknowledge his existence. His ideology is the village but his material base is rectified spirit. And his politics is the dialectics of collusion and conflict with corporate capital over the sharing of the nation's internal resources and external borrowings, and the devising of instruments and policies to that end, a politics he finds so complicated that he reposes equal quantities of resentful faith and hopeful doubt in P V Narasimha Rao's brahminical subtlety.

The breed exists and thrives all over the state but has exhibited its full development in the Rayalaseema districts, especially Kurnool and Cuddapah. This region has long been famous for rural landlord factions fighting with home-made bombs and rifles over property and power. Their violence is as notorious as their stranglehold over the social and political life of the villages they dominate is complete. With the arrival of arrack and arrack-based politics the landlords turned arrack businessmen have become enormously rich and have spread the tentacles of their factions to multiple villages and in some cases whole taluks. Their arsenal now contains stenguns and other automatic weapons and the earlier stranglehold over village life has become a parallel government spread over a large region—spanning anything from half a dozen villages to a whole taluk—financed principally by arrack business but also by levies on businessman, octroi on lorries

and tractors transacting transport business within their domain, and plain plunder of the citizenry.

It is not a metaphorical government but a real government complete with monopoly of penal and adjudicating powers, a monopoly to which the official police stations and courts are a willing accessory. Having set up these governments in their areas of domination, they have become MLAs—literally elected themselves with their bombs and guns wielded by murderous-gangs enticed with arrack as much as money and the licence to plunder the people in the name of the master—and ministers of the other government. For the last two years one of them, Mysoor Reddy of Cuddapah district, has been the home minister of the state. Not a particularly vicious factionist earlier, but a known timber smuggler, he has become notorious as their benefactor as home minister. Gun licences are now easy to purchase, the going rate being about Rs 10,000 per licence for any kind of fire-arm. 'Make the payment to the home minister at sunrise and you have your licence by sundown irrespective of any criminal record you may have, provided only he is sober that day' is the unanimous and gleeful comment they make. And now with Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy—who himself does no: maintain a gun-toting gang but leaves that to his youthful nephew Praleash Reddy and himself plays the role of a benign godfather of the factionists—as the state chief minister, this warlord-arrack businessman-politician clique has its own man as chief minister'. Janardhan Reddy was guilty of many obnoxious sins, but he had no direct connection with arrack business. Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy, on the contrary, is a godfather of arrack contractors.

This digression is meant only to indicate the political role of arrack and the difficulty of fighting it, a difficulty that was not immediately apparent to the thousands of rural women who have with pardonable innocence taken up what they perceive—and everybody else pretends also to perceive—as such an obviously just struggle that it needs nothing more for its victory than the mere articulation of its demands. The painful realisation that there is much more to injustice than its evident moral aspect, and the equally painful realisation that injustice, once institutionalised, has a thousand ways of frustrating the fight against it even as a din is raised by everyone about the righteousness of the cause, has slowly dawned on the women bringing with it the first taste of bitterness that every new struggle suffers sooner or later, blighting the fresh breath of innocent aspirations.

CPI-ML GROUPS' ROLE

The way the anti-arrack movement started is stiff obscure, though a legend has come into existence, as legends will. But even the most spontaneous-seeming legends lose their innocence in the crystallisation. Their creation is a political process, and the dominant political interest in Andhra Pradesh demands that the role played by the CPI-ML groups in bringing opposition to the arrack business on to the political agenda should be ignored. But any honest narration of the story cannot participate in the deception, which is not to say that the present anti-arrack agitation is a continuation of the CPI-ML groups' efforts or that the women who started the fight against arrack in the villages of Nellore district were aware of and inspired by the previous efforts of the CPI-ML groups.

It is perhaps eight years ago that the CPI-ML groups working at that time mainly in the Telangana districts witnessed the damage being done to the lives of the rural poor by the steadily increasing price of arrack as well as the equally steady and calculated extension of its sales. They first concentrated their opposition on the first aspect—the increasing price of retail arrack—and fought continuously for a reduction in the price.

The argument was that the poor labourers were spending a large part—soon to become the whole of their daily wages—on a couple of packets of arrack and that was destroying them financially. A reduction in price was demanded so that they may be left with at least a little of their daily wage. White the struggle—which was taken up by all the CPI-ML groups—was quite successful in its aims, it often had the unexpected effect that the labourers drank more than before of the cheap liquor and thus spent as much as before on it and spoilt their health much more into the bargain. This, as well as the fact that CPI-ML groups levied a party fund on the same arrack contractors they were fighting, led to a lot of criticism, some of it genuine and some of it motivated. Whatever the merits of the criticism and the replies the CPI-ML groups gave, the fact remains that it was this effort that put the focus on the horrible role that arrack was fast beginning to play in the lives of the rural and urban poor from the beginning of the 1980s, especially after N T Rama Rao's Telugu Desam Party came to power. Indeed, though NTR—whose pride has always been that women vote for him more than men—has now taken the cue from the women's movement and started a campaign for total prohibition to the bewilderment of a sceptical public, it was he who

realised the fiscal, economic and political role that arrack business could be made to play in a society that is reluctant to tax its rich and whose rich are reluctant to invest in slow-yielding productive enterprises. It was he who said eight years ago in reply to a Congressman's criticism of this nasty policy that arrack is the goose that lays golden eggs and he would certainly not put it to death (a comment that Congressmen are today gleefully taunting him with).

It is about two years ago that the CPI-ML groups took up a struggle to stop the arrack auctions and prevent the sale of arrack in the villages. They got tremendous support from the women, who suffer daily torture at the hands of their inebriated husbands, as well as quite a lot of men. The PW group took up the struggle by such means as attacking and killing arrack contractors, destroying arrack shops, setting the liquor on fire, etc The other major CPI-ML group, usually called the C P Reddy group but now known as the Janashakti group, organised local as well as district level protest rallies and dharnas by women through the Progressive Organisation of Women (Stree Vimukthi).

While a large number of middle class intellectuals—especially old Gandhians and freedom fighters—expressed appreciation and support for the anti-arrack movement, the fact that it was led by the naxalites introduced a lot of hypocrisy into the response. It was more important to criticise the aberrations than to support the principle. As for the government, anything done by the naxalites is to be not only opposed but actually defeated by the most brutal means available. It is no exaggeration to imagine that if the naxalites ever take up a struggle against prostitution the government will perhaps force all women at gun point to become prostitutes just to defeat the naxalites' political programme. And so for the last two years Warangal and Karimnagar districts have witnessed the obnoxious sight of police stations being converted into arrack shops and policemen armed with self-loading rifles guarding crates of arrack packets and vending them. It even went to the ridiculous extent of policemen identifying villages where people had stopped drinking and beating up the villagers, abusing them for their naxalite sympathies.

LINK WITH LITERACY MOVEMENT

This year's events, however, started far away from Warangal and Karimnagar districts. It was in the southern coastal district of Nellore that women of a village called Dubagunta stopped the vending of arrack in their village after two men of the village died after a bout of drinking. This

event which happened a few months ago is said to have been preceded by a lot of informal debate among the villagers (especially women) attending adult literacy classes, about the evils of drink. The teacher-volunteers conducting the government's literacy campaign would berate the men for getting drunk and not attending the classes, and there would be discussion about how in many families the men drink all they earn and the women have to work and run the household on their earnings and get beaten daily into the bargain by the inebriated husbands. The volunteers of the Jana Vignana Vedika organised by the CPI(M) cadre played an important role in generating this consciousness. And the collector of the district whose responsibility it is to run the literacy programme happened to be a dynamic person with a known concern for the poor, and the reading material for the literacy classes prepared by the district literacy council contained short anecdotes touching upon various evils bedeviling the life of the poor, principally 'safe' ones like superstitious beliefs, excessive greed, and lack of neighbourly concern, etc, but also a few themes bordering on the dangerous. One of them is arrack. The success of the women of Dubagunta in getting the arrack shops closed in their village soon found its way into the reading material, and that sparked further discussion in other villages. The next major incident happened at Saipet where an intoxicated man stabbed his father to death. The women of the village not only stopped arrack from being sold in the village but took out a procession against arrack, at Kavali, the nearest division headquarters town. This event became news and set people thinking across the district.

It is doubtful that those who prepared the reading material intended their well-meaning effort as anything other than a sensible method of creating interest in literacy by telling stories about the people's lives and problems rather than Sita and Rama. But what teachers intend and what students learn can on happy occasions be widely divergent. There is no proof that there was an appreciable increase in the interest in literacy in Nellore district but there was certainly an upsurge against arrack and the destruction it has wrought in their lives, much to the irritation of the Arrack Contractors' Association also known as the government of Andhra Pradesh. The government certainly did not expect the harmless literacy campaign to result in such a headache, much less from the most politically invisible of the wretched masses, the women of poor rural families.

August is the month in which excise auctions are held, and on August 11, the

date fixed by the collector of Nellore district for auction, there was a major demonstration of women at the collector's office at Nellore, forcing the auction to be postponed. Subsequently, the auction was postponed six times and never held at all, as each time there was a solid demonstration preventing the auction. All the opposition parties, voluntary organisations, the POW (Stree Vimukti) of the CPI-ML and dalit and civil liberties organisations joined the protest and put their organisations at the movement's disposal. The Nellore protest inspired women—with or without any organised leadership—to stage demonstrations at many other district headquarters in a bid to prevent the arrack auctions. It nearly succeeded at neighbouring Ongole where however a pliable district collector held the auction at midnight after the demonstrators had dispersed. In other places the protest came a little too late and the auction could not be prevented.

But the movement had in the meanwhile caught the imagination of (especially) women all over the state, and the movement entered the second stage of preventing shops being stocked and the liquor sold. Co-ordination committees were formed in towns and big villages all over the state by all kinds of organisations big and small or simply by women residents for this purpose. Village campaigns were conducted in areas not yet affected by the upsurge. Soon women (aided by sympathetic men in some places) started picketing liquor shops, forcing vendors to give an undertaking not to sell, shaving the head or moustaches of recalcitrant vendors, taking them round the village on donkeys, throwing out liquor packets stocked in the shops, setting the liquor on fire and so on. While the CPI(M) cadre and those of their women's organisations

insisted on peaceful and lawful methods of protest, cadre of dalit and CPI-ML organisations encouraged more violent forms of protest. But where the women were on their own or too strong-willed for those trying to organise them, their anger at the violence they have suffered as a consequence of arrack has led them to forms of protest more violent than even the most militant organisers advocated. It was in such situations that acts such as humiliating drunkards, wife-tormentors and obstinate arrack vendors by shaving their heads or parading them on donkeys took place.

While the CPI-ML groups and their women's organisations such as the POW (Stree Vimukthi) which already have a history of agitation for stopping the arrack business quickly moved in to organise extensive campaigns, the parliamentary parties were initially caught off their guard by the movement. The Congress(I) and the Telugu Desam parties are almost entirely parties of arrack contractors. Quite a few BJP and the CPI leaders too have interests in the arrack business. While the Congress(I) leaders, being in power as well as arrack business, reacted with very little enthusiasm and a lot of patronising advice to the women ('you first reform your husband' being everybody's favourite) and arrogant witticisms, the parties in opposition soon realised that business or no business, women are half the population and therefore 50 per cent of the voters. The leader who made the surest choice was N T Rama Rao, the man who was, as chief minister during 1983-89, principally responsible for flooding the state with the obscene fluid. It is part of the mythology of the rise of NTR that women in many families defied their Congress-voting husbands for the first

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time in their lives to vote him to power. And he always regarded women as his special constituency, referring to them invariably as 'daughters of the Telugu household' (of which, of course, he is the grand patriarch). And so to the shock of the arrack contractors of his party and to the astonishment of the people of the state who have rarely seen such cynical manipulation of people's aspirations, he jumped into the agitation and made Prohibition his latest cause. His reluctant party men are playing truant with his directive to fall in line but his party women are happy to be officially allowed to express solidarity that agitating women are demanding from them, whereas Congress women have to maintain an uncomfortable silence or avoid the agitators. The anti-Congress press has also taken up the cause and is encouraging the movement in unprecedented measure. *Eenadu* whose proprietor and editor in addition to being anti-Congress is fully conscious of the need of legitimacy for the ruling classes and is aware that nothing has in recent years destroyed legitimacy the way arrack has, is well into the agitation, encouraging it by publishing the most trivial incidents as prominently as significant ones, and giving voice to the organisers of the movement in the remotest villages.

While all this is a mixed bag, it is the tremendous tenacity, courage and initiative of the women that is a truly remarkable phenomenon. As a mass movement of women it is the first of its kind in the history of the state, the first that was created by women out of their own decision to take their future—and society's—in their hands. Out of this unique feature there have come up women's organisers and activists in village after village, town after town. Contractors and politicians who tried to dismiss them or give them patronising advice have got the shock of their lives (one contractor, brother of the member of parliament who vacated the Nandyal seat to make way for P V Narasimha Rao, told the women who were picketing a shop of his to 'first reform your husbands'. The women answered back: 'Can your wife reform you?'). They devised the most innovative ways of harassing the contractors and arrack vendors.

MOUNTING POLIO: ATTACKS

Their path has not been smooth. After some initial hesitation the police and the arrack contractors' goondas have started attacking the agitating women. They are being beaten with rods and lathis, boots and rifle butts. Being women they are subjected to further assault in the form of vulgar abuse and threat of molestation.

There have been a couple of cases of attempted disrobing of agitators. And the police have been filing non-bailable cases and sending agitators to jail. Noticeably, these attacks have been most violent where the contractor involved is an influential man, and the police therefore pliable. In Kurnool district where an arrack contractor by name Baireddy Rajashekar Reddy, son of the MLA of Nandikotkur, a much more vicious man than the father—it is a general rule with the warlords of Rayalaseema that the younger generation of the species is more dangerous than the older—employed his goondas to surround and attack a campaigning party of the POW (Siree Vimukthi), what the police did was to impose prohibitory orders and curb (he victims from taking any action against the assailants.

But what is perhaps the most violent attack on the agitators has taken place at Kalvakurthi in Mahboobnagar district, the native constituency of the Janata DaPs general secretary Jaipal Reddy. The way the incident took place is instructive. There had been no arrack agitation in this place till the end of October. The local TOP leader, who happened not to be an arrack contractor, was making halting attempts to form an agitating committee of opposition parties. He was not particularly enthusiastic perhaps because the arrack business of the area happened to be shared by TDP leader with a criminal record in anti-Muslim riots and the brother of the Panchayat Raj minister in the state's cabinet who had once tied up a press reporter and thrown him on a railway track for having dared to write about his goondas' attacks on tribal hamlets. But unbidden by him, the women of Kalvakurthi took up the agitation. What happened was that on October 24 two dalit labourers who were drinking at an arrack shop were arrested by the police and beaten very badly in lock-up. The TDP leader got them released the next day and they went home, their bodies badly bruised. Their wives (no doubt while attending the bruises) were struck by the idea they too could start an anti-arrack movement like the women of the other towns that the papers were reporting about. Having finished attending to their husbands they went out, not to ask the TDP leader to speed up the committee he was trying to set up, but to ask the women of each family, first in the dalit area and then in the other area, to come out and join a procession to picket the arrack shops in the town. Within two hours, 500 women gathered and went round the town shouting slogans and forcing the arrack vendors to close down their shops. A fully loaded police jeep followed them looking

for the slightest chance to attack them. The chance came at a shop where there was an altercation, and the police swooped upon the women and beat them mercilessly with lathis as thick as an adult's hand. The women were chased into houses, pulled out and thrashed. They were kicked and abused. About 80 women received injuries. For two weeks most of the women carried the bruises and could neither walk nor work in the fields.

Such attacks, and the endless procrastination of the government in taking a positive decision about their demand that the women find self-evidently so just, has dampened the movement a little in recent days. The government, with the cynical assessment that sufficient delay will cool the ardour of the agitating women and then it will be on the familiar ground of dealing with the opposition parties and the CPI-ML groups, has been indulging in a spurious exercise of consultation with the public. First a cabinet subcommittee and then a PCC(I) subcommittee were formed and they started inviting the more prominent among the women activists, opposition leaders, freedom fighters and intellectuals to advise the government. The said advice pertains to the government's alleged perplexity on two counts: how to stop spurious arrack if arrack is legally banned, and how to raise the revenue to fill the budgetary gap created by banning arrack. Since even without a ban on arrack the legally supplied liquor is supplemented by more than twice the amount of spurious arrack, the source of the first perplexity is clear. It emanates from those who are asking the question; it is not a question but a threat that if they are forced to ban the sale of arrack they will flood the state with spurious arrack, and the responsibility for forcing them into such a criminal act lies on women who are making an impracticable demand. As for the second question the very idea of using arrack as a fiscal instrument is so abhorrent to anyone even slightly less criminal than the average Congressman, that respondents who appeared before the two subcommittees would have been entirely justified if they refused to entertain the question.

And so the issue drags on. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy has said that he will announce his decision by December. Whatever decision he takes can only inaugurate a new phase of struggle, for the arrack contractors who are ruling the state are not going to give up such a lucrative source of income so easily. This is the real concern. The other concern about budgetary income is as spurious as the arrack they are threatening to replace the official fluid with.