

# “Give Us Employment, Not Liquor”

## —Anti Liquor Movement in Uttarakhand

UTTARAKHAND consists of three districts in Kumaon and five in Garhwal. In Uttarakhand drinking is no longer a personal issue but has become a social, economic and political evil. Ever since independence, sporadic struggles against drunkenness have broken out from time to time. From 1965 to 1971 a strong movement spread so the government had to declare prohibition in certain areas. At present, there is complete prohibition in Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Tehri, partial prohibition, under which liquor is available with a permit, in Pauri and Pithoragarh, but liquor is freely available in Nainital, Almora and Dehradun.

None of the prohibition laws have been effective however, because certain medicines like Mritsanjivni Sura, Ashoka liquid and biotonic are being drunk as intoxicants. According to law, these medicines should not have more than 20 percent alcohol content but a People’s Union for Democratic Rights survey found 75 percent alcohol content in Ashoka liquid and 80 percent in the Sura. These medicines are freely available and are cheaper than liquor, so many men prefer to drink them even though they are more harmful than liquor. Thus there is no area in Uttarakhand where liquor or an alternative intoxicant is not available.

Liquor is available even in those farflung areas where there is no school, no ration shop, no employment, no hospital. If there is a school there is no



Public meeting on June 17 in Nainital

teacher and no building, if there is a hospital there is no doctor or no medicines. In these areas some people literally think that *sansad* (parliament) refers to some kind of disease. Funds allocated for development projects find their way into the pockets of middlemen. Many villages have taps and electricity lines but no water or electricity ever flows through them though the tax has to be paid. These villages face a scarcity of firewood and every monsoon, epidemics rage and claim many lives.

Yet, amid such chaos, there is a well organised network for the distribution of liquor. Liquor is transported in buses, trucks and taxis. A few families have a monopoly in the liquor trade and they take contracts throughout Uttar Pradesh. With the help of local ruffians, they manage to circumvent prohibition laws, and sell country liquor in bottles labelled factory made. The trade is so remunerative that some earn a living merely by transporting dozen bottles to villages near a distillery each day.

It is women who suffer most from the widespread drunkenness. Labourers who earn Rs 15 to 20 a day spend Rs 8 to 10 on liquor. Many men do not share the household expenses at all but spend their entire wage on liquor. During the fruit season, most of the income from orchards is spent on liquor. Villagers who bring milk, vegetables, fruits for sale in the town markets return home drunk and do not contribute anything to the running of the house. It is said that the buckets which come full of milk in the morning return full of liquor at night. Having spent their cash income, many men begin selling their property, wives' jewellery, clothes, utensils, even land. One woman in ranikhet told us that her husband had sold 16 *tolas* of her gold merely for liquor.

The women say that nowadays, even children have taken to drink. Women in Ramgarh say that schoolboys spend their fees on liquor and share it out among themselves. When children are sent on errands to the market they spend the money on liquor and return home emptyhanded. When some boys in Sialdah reached school drunk with Ashoka liquid, enquiries revealed that a shopkeeper had got them addicted by distributing the liquid free and later, they had begun to buy it from him.

Men drink on any and every occasion. They can be seen drinking in tea shops, hotels, even on the road. Teachers, doctors, karamcharis can be seen drinking at work. Of course, drinking is inevitable at weddings and festivals. Even funerals have become occasions for drinking. Some years ago, some villagers who had gone for a cremation got drunk and so did the bus driver. The bus fell down the mountain and all the men of the village aged between 15 and 55 died. At Selachaur near Haldwani, a party carrying goods for a wedding had an accident because the truck driver was drunk. When the bodies of those who died in the accident were being brought back, there was another accident due to drunkenness and more people died.

There are hundreds of homes where the children are hungry, there is no money for clothing or school fees, but the father wastes his entire income on liquor. Women do most of the agricultural and other work in these areas. They work in the fields, in the house, look after the animals, fetch the firewood and water. After all this labour, they have to bear the beatings of a drunken husband, father or brother. Many women live on their own. Drunken men try to harass these women.

When women go into the fields or forests to work, they feel insecure because of drunken men wandering around. Mothers cannot bear to see their young sons taking to drink. For all these reasons, women are full of anger against drunkenness and are ready to go to any lengths to prevent it. Some of them have been heard saying that distilleries should be set on fire and liquor factories destroyed. An old woman of village Dhursil near Bhimtal said that all drunkards should be tied hand and foot and thrown into the river.

### **Beginning Of The Current Movement**

In 1977 Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini (USV) was organised at Gopeshwar by the

joint efforts of many organisations. Men like Chandiprasad Bhatt, Shamsher Singh Visht, Vipin Tripathi, Kunwar Prasun, Yogesh Bahuguna, Sachidanand Bharti, Puran Chand Tiwari, Pradip Tamta, were founding members of the organisation.

The USV was active in the Chipko movement. In 1983, a meeting was arranged at Almora where all the problems prevailing in the hill areas were discussed. It was felt that liquor was a major problem and should be taken up as a priority issue. In January 1984, a supportive organisation, Jagar, arranged a *padyatra* from Bhavali in Nainital to Srinagar in Garhwal. On the way the team conducted surveys in villages, performed street plays and held meetings. The team also endorsed the conclusion that the battle against liquor must be the first battle in Uttarakhand.

In February 1984 the inhabitants of village Basbhira in Chaukhutiya block, Almora, found a man with illicit liquor in his possession. They complained to the local officer, Kameshwar Prasady but he did not take any action. Then they caught this officer himself smuggling liquor. At this, they *gheraoed* him. The local SDM threatened to kill an activist, Puran Chand



**The June 17 demonstration in Nainital**

Tiwari, which enraged the people further. A public meeting was held, where many women and men resolved to launch a movement against liquor. This was followed by a systematic attempt to detect illicit liquor. At Dwarahar, Masi, Chaukhutia, Mikiyasen, Sheelapani, Someshwar, Salt, Sealdah, Deghar, and many other places, illicit liquor, Sura and Ashoka liquid was detected. The sellers were caught, their faces were blackened and they were paraded in public. Meetings and demonstrations were held in many villages. Sura and liquid worth lakhs of rupees was destroyed or confiscated.

The people were particularly infuriated because they discovered that a number of village headmen, block officers, leaders and other influential men were actively involved in the trade. These men, when caught, were also subjected to the same treatment. They were paraded with blackened faces and made to vow in public that they would give up the trade. The success in exposing such men encouraged the people. The climax was reached on March 26, when local people of Garampani in Nainital caught big traders, Kundan Seth and his son, of Kanpur, and Hukum Seth, of Almora, as they were returning from a liquor auction at Almora. These men were stripped naked, garlanded with shoes and their faces were blackened. They were paraded and forced to vow that they would never trade in liquor again in the hill areas.

On February 14, a mass demonstration was held at Chaukhutia in which about 10,000 people from surrounding villages took part. The demonstration was accompanied with the traditional musical instruments of Kumaon such as drums and trumpets. Another demonstration of about 14,000 people was held on February 26.

Since fairs and festivals had become occasions for drinking, the movement made an effort to create an antidrunkness atmosphere at such times. Public meetings were held at such fairs. Very little liquor could be sold at the Shivratri fair in Mikiyasen and Someshwar. The use of liquor at weddings also decreased.

Again, at Holi, USV activists formed teams and went from village to village singing antiliquor songs in traditional style. A Holi procession was taken out on March 14 from Chaukhutia in which both women and men took part. This was a very new thing, since women normally do not take part in Holi processions.

A decrease in public sale and consumption of liquor was perceptible in areas where the movement was strong. There were also some cases of people undergoing a change of heart and joining the movement. For instance, Narendra of

Chaukhutia, who used to be considered a drunken rogue, has become an activist and even been to jail twice in the course of the agitation. Keshav who owned four distilleries near Chaukhutia has himself destroyed them and become an activist. Devidutt Pandey and Manoharlal Chaudhuri who were drunkards, joined the movement and participated in fast unto death at Nainital.

### **Phase Of Confrontation**

The movement began in rural areas where Sura, Ashok liquid and country liquor were more freely available than



**Public humiliation of liquor traders at Garampani on March 26,**

factory made liquor. So there was no direct confrontation with the government, even though there was an indirect tussle because many local men have Congress (I) connections. But soon the movement began to challenge auctions of liquor by the administration.

The Uttar Pradesh government announced an auction on March 20 and 21. The USV resolved to oppose it, and gave a call in the villages: "*Nasha nahin, rozgar* '(Give us jobs, not liquor)': On March 20, a procession of thousands with drums and traditional flags proceeded to the city to tell administration that they did not need liquor. The government

On March 27, the contracts for factory made liquor were to be made. The administration thought that since all the activists were under arrest, there would be no problem in organising the auction. But in the night hundreds of people from surrounding areas reached Almora. They went in procession to the court where the auction was to take place. The gate was closed and PAC men were on guard all around. The women managed to break through the PAC cordon and went straight to the room where the auction was in progress. The men went in too, behind the women. When the contractors saw the procession entering, they fled through

at liquor distilleries was inaugurated. *Dharnas* and relay fasts were organised at Ranikhet, Almora and Bhavali distilleries. On April 12, the administration reacted with violence.

A *chakkajam* had been declared at Someshwar but was lifted at 3 p.m. At 3.30 p.m., the SDM arrived and ordered a lathi charge. Women, men and children working in the fields were beaten up. People were beaten in their own houses. The local washerman and tea shop owners, who were supportive to the activists, were also not spared. Even animals were violently treated.

At Almora and Bhavali, ruffians were hired to attack the demonstrators. In the attacks, women were injured with lathis and hockey sticks. A lot of anger was generated throughout the city and the people managed to catch 12 ruffians who were handed over to the police. The next day, only one of them was found to be still in police custody. No action was taken against any of them. A number of activists were arrested and sent to jail. On April 13, the distilleries were reopened.

Therefore, on April 17, seven women began a fast unto death at Almora. Many other women sat with them on relay fast. Finally, on April 20, the government declared prohibition in Almora but did not implement the order at once. On May 3, the activists were unconditionally released and on June 1, liquor shops were closed down in Almora.

### **Spreading Movement**

The movement began to spread towards Nainital. On March 9 and 16, demonstrations were held at Garampani and bottles were confiscated and broken. At Bhavali, the distillery was kept closed by a 12 day long relay fast. At Ramgarh, women locked the country liquor shop on April 4. On May 14, the state minister for mountain development gave an assurance that the distillery would remain closed till prohibition was implemented in Nainital. But on May 18, the administration and contractors sent some ruffians who broke the lock. After this, the women made



**Women gheraoing the district magistrate in Nainital**

hastily changed the dates of the auction to March 26 and 27.

It was decided to organise a *chakka jam* in the city on March 26. The administration declared section 144 throughout Almora. In defiance of the prohibitory order a procession was taken out. The police arrested 15 women and 36 men. Some of the men were kept in prison for 42 days. The *chakka jam* was successful but the contracts for country liquor were made under heavy security arrangements.

back doors. The district magistrate took refuge in the bathroom. The women, led by Kala Kandpal of Chaukhtia and Sheela Visht of Almora, tore up the auction documents and disconnected the mike. Therefore, the auction could not take place and had to be postponed to March 31. On March 31, a procession went straight to the district magistrate's office. The administration then announced that the contracts would be given by tender instead of by auction.

From April 1, a programme of *dharnas*



**Elderly women—mainstay of the movement**

several attempts to lock it again, but the police intervened each time to stop them.

On April 24, three activists started a fast unto death outside the office of the district magistrate, Nainital. They were arrested on May 2, on the charge of attempting to commit suicide. On May 4, three women sat on fast. On May 7, one of them, Leela Pandey, was arrested. A delegation went to Lucknow. The government gave an assurance that prohibition would be enforced in Nainital too in June. Since no enforcement had taken place till June 17, a huge procession was taken out.

The movement also demands a ban on medicines with a more than 10 percent alcohol content. The superintendent of police at Almora had stopped a truck containing Sura worth nearly two lakhs. But he was charged with contempt of court and the Sura was released. Therefore the prohibition order at Almora is ineffective because Sura is still available. Liquor too is smuggled in from Bhavali, Nainital, and Haldwani. At Garampani, the activists themselves check vehicles and hand over smugglers to the police.

A massive signature campaign asking

for a ban on Sura is now underway. It is planned to hand over the petition as a public litigation case to the supreme court.

A 15 day long public education programme was organised outside shops selling Sura in Almora. At Ramnagar, on July 21, the students' union, college and youth organisations raided many shops, confiscated Ashok liquid and sealed it. Meetings, demonstrations and attempts to create an anti-liquor atmosphere at fairs still continue.

### **Give Liquor, Take Votes**

The movement analysis of the problem is contained in its three slogans: Those who drink are enemies of the family, those who sell liquor are enemies of society, those who patronise the liquor trade are enemies of the country. Thus the millionaires who control the liquor trade are seen as the primary enemies. Those local people who sell liquor in villages and whose shops become centres for ruffianism and corruption earn a lot of money and have political influence. They have tried to oppose the movement in many ways.

They spread slander against activists. For instance, when Sura and Ashok liquid was confiscated, the rumour was spread

that liquor traders are financing this action against rivals. When the liquor auction was stopped, the rumour was spread that Sura sellers have bribed the activists. Now that the movement is spreading against both liquor and intoxicating medicines, the participants are called extremists, terrorists and antinational elements.

At Almora and Pithoragarh, the members of parliament seem to have a hand in this antimovement propaganda. The posters put up against the movement at Nainital, when torn off, were found to have a picture of Indira Gandhi at the back. Demonstrations were taken out on June 15 in Nainital, and on July 23 in Almora, with slogans such as "Give liquor and get votes", "Rum for the soldiers and courage for the youth."

### **Women's Role**

Women have played an active role in the movement. Village women have been particularly active. At Almora, even 80 year-old women could be seen with their walking sticks, raising slogans. A group of women from a village near Havalbagh said that none of the men were willing to come for the demonstration since all of them drink, so the women had come on their own. A number of Muslim women such as Hamida Begum, Fatima Kanij, Nurjahan Begum, Sakhri Begum, Habibanisa took part in the fast at Almora. At first they wore burkah but later they removed the burkah. On June 17, though *roza* was in progress they reached Nainital for the demonstration.

Women played a most forceful rule in Ramgarh. This district is famed for its apples but its prosperity is being drained away due to liquor. Women of the surrounding villages locked the distillery and even after the police stopped them, they continually made efforts to relock it. They sent teams to Nainital to take part in the struggle there. They sat on a fast unto death and one of them, 55 year old Leela Pandey was arrested on the charge of attempting suicide. Later, she was unconditionally released.

Women have suffered so much from the drunkenness of men that they are desperate. When the SDM at Ranikhet

ordered the women to stop the *dharna* at the distillery one woman broke down and said: "My children are starving for days due to this distillery. Why should we not sit on *dharna* outside it?"

The women have had to face all sorts of slanderous accusations and harassment. Many women who wanted to participate in the movement were stopped by their fathers or husbands. They were intimidated and told that they

would be arrested if they went in a procession. Many urban women in Nainital and Almora felt that they would be dishonoured if they walked on the streets in procession but others argued that there is no dishonour in doing right.

Women who have been continuously involved in the movement told me that they feel a new self confidence. Interestingly, middle aged women have been more active in the movement. Employed women could

not be so active because they were afraid of losing their jobs. In the course of the movement, many women's organisations have come into being like Mahila Sangharsh Samiti in Almora Mahila Mangal Dal in Ramgarh, Mahila Morcha at Ranikhet and Mahila Morcha at Nainital. Though not very strong organisationally, women have played a major role in the movement.

*(Translated from Hindi)*

## Remembering The Madwomen of The Plaza De Mayo\*

Written in memory of Marta Traba, who died in the Avianca crash, Madrid, 1983

*There is nothing here,  
the plaza, silent,  
small, blue,  
in the centre of candles that fan out  
like alien shapes  
circling  
over the stones  
Is there anyone here?  
It begins, the pilgrimage of the invisible ones  
the procession,  
the words of the deluded women,  
they are, it is said,  
the madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo  
searching for eyes,  
for warm hands,  
searching for a body,  
for your lips not to possess you  
but so I can always call you  
beloved.  
Wrinkled, skeletal,  
praying,  
screaming in rage,  
questioning  
above the echoes,  
the madwomen,  
in Buenos Aires, in El Salvador,  
in Treblinka  
want to know,  
have to know  
where are their seventeen year old sons?  
their husbands, fathers of their children?  
the boyfriends of the youngest girls?  
where they perhaps thrown into the fetid river  
of their judges?*

*They come near,  
look at them how they flutter, the witches of truth  
look at them how the rain plasters down their  
listless and demented hair  
look at their feet, how small they are to bear  
the pain of abandonment, the pain of indifference.  
The madwomen,  
holding fast to a photograph,  
tattered, wrinkled, faded,  
empty of uncertain memory  
captive photograph  
by whom? for whom?  
look at the silence in the plaza of the madwomen,  
look how the earth scurries to hide  
tires  
falls back like one mortally wounded who only wishes for  
rest,  
and so it is only silence that comes to hear them  
it is the silence  
of the plaza  
that listens of the  
photographs  
of the forgotten ones  
here presents.*

—Marjorie Agosin  
*(translated by Suzanne Jill Levine)*

*\*In the main squares of many Latine American countries wives, mothers, daughters, and other women gather, each holding up photographs of their missing loved ones, taken away by the murderous military torturers who are their country's rulers. They bear witness to women's love and courage in the struggle against fear and ruthless power.*