

## Anti-liquor campaign in Keoratala

As soon as the harvesting and threshing season ended in December 2004, Jana Sanskriti and Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti meetings in the villages began. Various problems of village life were discussed at these meetings. Illegal liquor was one of them.

One day we were returning after a meeting at Harinkhola. We met some people from Bhairabinagar on the way. They had something urgent to tell us. Illegal liquor is a burning problem in Bhairabinagar – there have been repeated attempts at stopping the manufacture and sale of liquor but to no avail. The liquor makers have the backing of influential people. Those who had led the struggle against them had been punished – some had their ponds poisoned, others faced damage to their betel leaf plantations. All opposition was thus silenced. These people requested us to go to their village and convene a meeting on this issue. We agreed.

30-40 people attended the meeting in Bhairabinagar. Discussions went on till late – they could not stop talking about how much they were suffering due to this problem. They wanted us - Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti – to do something about this. We said we will definitely try but the villagers would have to be active in the effort. Also, we would not conduct the campaign only in this village. We would include the whole Anchal in our campaign.

A few days later we had a core meeting at Girish Bhavan. The subject of the meeting had been decided the previous month – illegal liquor. We had also divided amongst the various aspects to be discussed, so that we could make a presentation each. The various aspects were:

- What is illegal liquor, how is it made?
- What effect does excessive consumption of this liquor have on the human body?
- What are the social impacts of sale & consumption of this liquor?
- In our villages, how are the interests of the influential people, liquor sellers and police linked?
- The history of anti-liquor movements in India in recent times.

The presentations and ensuing discussions were very interesting. We all learnt a lot, and this stood us in good stead later when we were conducting meetings in the villages on this subject. At this meeting we also formulated our strategy for the anti-liquor campaign. It was decided that we will take the following steps:

1. Wall-writing in all the villages on various aspects of consumption of illegal liquor
2. Meetings in all the villages on this subject
3. Mobilise people in the villages to put up posters on the subject in their own neighbourhood
4. Collect signatures for mass petition to the administrative authority
5. Mass deputation to the administrative authorities.

The meeting ended after we had decided what we were going to write on the walls and the posters.

By first week of January 2005, the campaign had begun in earnest. Every morning our teams would set off with a bucket of limewash and some indigo (blue colour that is used for washing white clothes). Residents of the village where we were going had prior information and would locate walls suitable for writing. We would first paint the whole wall white with the limewash and then write with indigo. We overheard a range of comments as we set out writing on the walls/

*“The government is issuing licenses for liquor shops. Why don't you go to the government and ask them to stop first?”*

*“You are writing good things, my son. But do you think this evil can be stopped? If you can do something I am with you.”*

*“What is the point of writing on the wall? We need to go and raid the liquor shops – seize all the liquor and set fire to it.” – this came from a woman*

One gentleman, Tarapada Das from Bajberia took down all that we were writing. Then he went to back to his village and wrote on the walls there.

140 residents of Bhairabinagar village signed on a mass petition. This document, along with memorandum from Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti and Jana Sanskriti were handed over to the representatives of the local administration:

- S.D.O. – Sub Divisional Officer at Diamond Harbour
- S.D.P.O. – Sub Divisional Police Officer at Diamond Harbour
- Afgari – Excise Officer of the Block
- B.D.O. – Block Development Officer at Kulpi
- O.C. of P.S. – Officer in Charge at the Police Station, Kulpi
- Anchal Pradhan – Head of the Keoratala Anchal Panchayat

The S.D.O. expressed his appreciation at our efforts. He requested us to give him a map to identify the manufacturers and sellers of illegal liquor in the area. The B.D.O. assured us that we would receive cooperation from him. The Excise Officer complained that they often returned empty-handed from their visits to the villages because they could not identify the houses of the culprits and villagers are not willing to help. Besides in these remote villages, the amount of illegal liquor is so small, that it is really not worthwhile going in all the way there. When we approached the Anchal Panchayat for an appointment, we were told that this subject is not under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. However, later we learnt that if the Anchal Panchayat issues a notice, it is mandatory for the liquor sellers to close down.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2005, villagers assembled at Basar to go and hand over their mass petition and memorandum to the Anchal Pradhan. Over 200 people gathered, and walked en masse towards the Anchal Panchayat Office, singing songs, shouting slogans. Many were holding placards and banners. When we reached the Office, we found the well-known illegal liquor manufacturers of the region coming out of the Pradhan's room. We had to wait for almost two hours to get an audience with the Pradhan – even though we had sought an appointment for this meeting. In the meanwhile our people were getting very restless. Especially the women, who were bent upon extracting a concrete promise from the Pradhan today. While we waited the Jana Sanskriti team from Shyamnagar village performed a play on the issue of illegal liquor. More and more people gathered at the Anchal Panchayat Office.

Finally the Pradhan summoned us – only 5 persons could go in and as soon as they entered the Office, the doors and windows of the room were shut. The rest of the people were asked to go downstairs and out of the gate and wait there. The meeting began. The Pradhan (a woman) did not say a word. The Upapradhan (assistant pradhan) conducted the meeting. He said there were some illegal liquor vendors but not as many as we said there were. "How can we stop these shops?" he asked, "if people stop drinking, these shops will close automatically. Why don't you all go from door to door and explain to the men that they should stop drinking?" We agreed to that but on one condition – that a representative of the Panchayat also comes along with us. On that, he said, " I cannot give my word." After some heated exchange on how the Panchayat has no will to stop illegal liquor, he ended the discussion by saying that a meeting of the Panchayat members would be convened within a month and this issue discussed. We would have to come again and find out what had been decided at that meeting.

The meeting had gone on for a long time. Outside, our 200-odd people were getting very impatient – they had no way of knowing what was going on inside. After a while the women went upstairs. The Pradhan had come out of the office for a short while. The women asked her what was happening inside. She replied rudely – this incensed the women so much that they almost broke into the Office. It was with great difficulty that we stopped them from doing that.

The 2-month long intensive campaign, then this massive turnout at the Anchal Panchayat Office – this has had a tremendous impact in the area. Never before has there been such a large campaign on this issue. The liquor manufacturers have become cautious. They have stopped making the stuff. They are buying it from other places and smuggling it in. There has been a huge raid at Raghunathpur – the biggest manufacturing centre of the illegal liquor.

Uma is a young member of Jana Sanskriti. A few days ago a liquor seller of Bhairabinagar was passing her house with a barrel of liquor he had just bought. She spotted him and stopped him. The small-built 20 year old girl threatened him and untied the barrel from his cycle – single-handed. Then she went off to call the other women in the village. They returned to find that he had fled, leaving the barrel behind! Next morning they poured out all the liquor and set it on fire. The women vowed not to let any liquor-seller pass that way. We have heard that liquor sellers nowadays don't take that route even though it is the most convenient one for entering their village. Uma lost her father last year. Her aged mother lives with 3 unmarried daughters in a tiny makeshift hut. Where did Uma get the courage to challenge these anti-social elements in her village?