

THIS is one of the more intelligent films made so far on the anti-liquor agitation of the women of Nellore district which eventually led to prohibition being imposed on the whole state of Andhra Pradesh. As the brochure of this film puts it, it is one of the most extraordinary social uprisings of modern India. Much hype has already been created around it, and it is an evocative subject with immense visual possibilities. Imagine the drama of rural women countering policemen's *lathis* with broomsticks and chilli powder. Imagine the visual power of a bonfire of liquor packets lighting up a clutch of triumphant women against a black night.

It is the latter image that the film opens with, suggesting that this will be another exercise in the glorification of this movement. Fortunately it is not so much that as a very tightly constructed account of why the agitation caught on the way it did, and why it succeeded. This is a long film, but so tightly packed that you cannot fast-forward without losing some element of a well-researched reconstruction. It is a dramatic reenactment of the events in Nellore district between 1992 and 1995 using people who took part in the movement. Men and women from some seven or eight villages acted in it. They bring it to vibrant life. "Why Women Unite" looks at the circumstances which combined to ignite this agitation. It begins with the Telugu Desam party under NTR introducing a particularly aggressive liquor policy, with a resulting spurt in government income from liquor. What used to be sold in bottles begins to be sold in sachets and liquor becomes more mobile than before. Andhra Pradesh's liquor revenue shoots up from Rs.230 crore to Rs.639 crores.

FILM REVIEW

“Why Women Unite”

The Story of an Uprising

(in Telugu, English and Hindi, 80 minutes)

Director: Shabnam Virmani,

Drishti Media Group and C-DIT

Review: Sevanti Ninan

Simultaneously, in Nellore, paddy cultivation is declining rapidly, being replaced by sugar cane. The work women got in the fields, from paddy is no longer available. In the film the protagonist's voice-over says, "Paddy has been everything for us. It is scary somehow to imagine our village without it. Yet everything is changing so fast. Sugarcane and agriculture are coming like demons into our lives... no matter how far we walk it is difficult for a woman to find work".

In 1992 the price index rises to an all-time high : The new Congress government that had come into power in Andhra Pradesh withdraws the Rs.2

rice scheme. The shift from paddy to sugarcane cultivation causes a loss of four lakh workdays. This, according to the film, is the slow economic ruination of the poor which forms the backdrop to the anti-liquor agitation. Deprived of work in the fields, women lose whatever maneuverability they had. The family income shrinks further. Watching it being steadily spent on liquor is the last straw.

Simultaneously, the film reconstructs the rise to affluence and power of the arrack contractor lobby in this region. The largest contractor of the district, a man who started life as a toddy tapper, is interviewed, and



sitting on a plush red upholstered chair he describes the economics of the arrack industry which enabled him to build substantial assets. The film tells you that the trade required the contractors to maintain gangs of goondas, as well as fund political parties. Eventually the contractors started contesting elections themselves. This then was the lobby that eventually bowed before the might of a spontaneous leaderless agitation that spread in four months to 800 villages.

The other clear delineation that takes place in the film is that of a government structure working totally at cross-purposes. This analysis is presented in the words of the joint collectors, collectors and officials of the government-sponsored literacy movement in this district. A former collector says that through its development schemes the government earmarks Rs. 16 crore for the poor, but in return the poor give the government Rs. 60 crore in arrack revenues. One arm of the government embarks upon a campaign for literacy and social change. The primer it prepares talks about the need to abolish drinking because it ruins family life. Another arm of the government works at how it can make government-supplied liquor more widely and freely available so that government revenues from liquor can increase.

From 1992 to 1995 there are many small and big confrontations, challenges, setbacks as well as triumphs. The film chronicles them all through the eyes of Kotamma, superbly enacted by a village woman. What is particularly effective from the beginning of the film is the English



voice narrating Kotamma's viewpoint. It is an often humorous narration, in what is not a cloying TV voice, but a light natural voice, expressing just the right degree of feeling and emotion. This alone sets this film apart. Documentaries made in this country seldom get this treatment.

"Why Women Unite" is a documentary with many interviews, it is also a dramatized reconstruction of the little incidents around which the agitation grew. Some of the incidents are stunning, such as the one in which one of the members of the literacy class dies, battered by a drunk husband whom she took on, when he tried to force himself on their daughter. It is just narrated, not shown. But it registers with the viewer.

There is pace, drama, and authenticity in the entire narration of

some three years events. There are two or three men and women who were part of it all, who sum up from time to time the different stages of the agitation. One of them is a Jan Vigyan spokesman, this being the body that coordinated the literacy movement in this district.

He is used most frequently by the film's makers, and in describing the point when the government decided to step in and sell liquor itself, after public opposition had repeatedly stalled liquor auctions, he says succinctly: "There is a people's order that liquor should not be sold. There is a government order that liquor should be sold. That is the end of government's morality before the people". If there is a flaw in this film it is, the absence of a credible dissident voice. Perhaps there was no credible dissident stand that could be taken on this issue.

Today prohibition has been lifted: the film had the foresight to anticipate this possibility in Kotamma's narration. It ends with her going off to contest a panchayat election because as she puts it, "Policies will change. Tomorrow prohibition may be lifted... there are no easy answers, no easy endings. Only the hope of fresh beginnings." □

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