



The Bottle That Does Not Cheer

Bhil Women's Fight Against Male Oppression and Alcoholism

○ Subhadra and Rahul

THE cold breeze blowing in from the hilltops was making the flames from the logfire leap and swerve creating a dynamic chiaroscuro on the purposeful faces of the women gathered around it. There were about thirty women, some old, some middle-aged and the rest young, a few with babies in their arms clapping in unison and singing. It was harvest time in the month of December in 1996 when farmers have to work hard all day but are yet very happy when the harvest is good as it was in that year. These Barela tribal women of Akya village in Kargone district of Madhya Pradesh, ignoring the exhaustion in their bones and the biting cold of the wind, had gathered together after the day's hard labours and the cooking of the evening meal for a meeting that would later prove to be groundbreaking. Only a few months ago such a meeting would have been unthinkable but some far reaching changes had taken place in between that had brought these women out of their homes at night.

The village of Akya is situated in a depression surrounded on all sides by forested hills of the Vindhya range. This is one of the many villages in the Narmada river valley in western Madhya Pradesh which are home to the

Bhil, Bhils, Barela, Mankar, Naik and Patelia subtribes of the Bhil tribe. Like all tribal communities the Bhils too for centuries fiercely defended their territories against encroachment but have lost ground in the face of modern firearms. Thereafter, it has been one long saga of travails for them with their situation declining sharply during British colonial rule. The history of the nineteenth century in western India is chequered with Bhil defiance of British rule. Ironically, matters have been further aggravated

rather than alleviated in the past half century of independent governance. A new wave of resistance against injustice started in the late 1960s in Maharashtra. These struggles later spread to the whole of western India and are posing a concerted challenge to the unjust policies of the Indian state.

Even though the Bhils have traditionally had a much more egalitarian social structure than that of Hindu society, this egalitarianism has not been extended to women.

There is a clear gender division of labour with the women having to do the domestic work, take on the responsibilities of child bearing and rearing as well as doing a great deal of the agricultural work. The women have no say in community affairs and are considered as commodities to be sold off for a bride-price at the time of marriage. Married women have to submit to polygamy and a few even get victimised in witch hunts. They also have to veil their faces in front of elder male relatives. Women have no right of inheritance. As with poor rural women elsewhere in India, the major burden of the so-called modernising thrust has had to be borne by the women. Moreover, certain policies of the government with regard to women, especially in connection



with population control, have further jeopardised their lives.

Consequently, even though Bhil women have participated shoulder to shoulder with Bhil men in the recent struggles to throw off the yoke of age-old repression, they have not been given the space to articulate problems specific to themselves which arise from male dominated structures and customs within Bhil society itself. Particularly troubled are grassroots women leaders. The men object to them travelling around a lot and neglecting domestic work. Some of these women have had to bear beatings when they have tried to assert control over their own bodies. Despite the presence of



articulate middle-class women activists the need to press on with the struggle around general issues had led to the struggle against patriarchy being put on the backburner. This is a universal problem faced by women in social movements the world over.

A New Beginning

A break with this sorry state of affairs was made in 1995 when we tried to consciously address women's issues. Organisational work with Bhil women was started in the Bagli and Barwah Tehsils of Dewas and Khargone districts of western Madhya Pradesh. The problem with organising poor rural women is that deep-rooted patriarchy prevents them from coming out of their homes. In most cases patriarchy has been internalised by the women themselves. As is well known, the combination of destructive development policies, the lack of adequate access to public health services and patriarchal oppression has resulted in alarming health problems for poor women. Consequently, for poor rural women, improving their health is most often

an urgent need that they have perforce to neglect. Women's health being an issue that affects the whole family it is relatively easy to get the acquiescence of the men to let women do something about it. Thus both in terms of a felt-need and strategically, health provides an ideal starting point for organising rural women.

Women's health is a much more complex issue than just the provision of adequate healthcare services. It has come to be recognised that women's health, motherhood, family planning and poverty alleviation are all enhanced when women have reproductive health rights in addition to economic and political rights at par with men. This thinking has formal recognition in the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. The Government of India too has acknowledged this and launched a Target Free Approach (TFA) from April 1996. The stress henceforth is ostensibly to be on the provision of adequate reproductive health services and choices to women in the use of contraceptives, rather

than on the fulfillment of sterilisation targets, as was previously the norm. Encouraged by this the organisation process concentrated on improving the reproductive health of women.

Health is dependent in part on the urgency with which one seeks it. The Bhil tribal women of the area are too burdened by multiple oppressions to be able to persist in seeking anything at all — let alone health. Moreover, in the sphere of reproductive health, there is an intimidating culture of silence. So for starters an attempt was made to open up this dark and forbidden area. A puzzling phenomenon was the general reluctance of women to talk about their reproductive

health problems in a women's group. Finally Ramanbai of Chandupura village spoke. She said that in her village there was tremendous infighting among the different families over various issues. There was a lot of backbiting. So women did not want to reveal their illnesses, public knowledge of which could be used against them. Consequently many times women refused to come to the meetings and talk about their health problems.

Considerable time had to be spent in winning the confidence of some key women in the villages before meetings could once again be conducted. When these meetings finally did get going, however, women came to them in large numbers to relate their problems. The women insisted that something should be done to provide clinical help from gynaecologists, which they had never received. An attempt was initially made to galvanise the government health service. The government health service in Barwah and Bagli Tehsils is in a sorry state. Not only is staff inadequate but there is also a shortage of medicines. The government

doctors had heard about the TFA but were cynical about its implementation. When repeated efforts to get better service from them did not bring about any great improvement we decided to hold reproductive health clinics with the help of doctors from Indore. These clinics revealed that most of the women coming for treatment suffered from severe anemia and various kinds of reproductive health problems of a virulent nature which did not easily respond to simple treatment. The complexity of the problems required that the women themselves develop an understanding of the working of their bodies as medication alone would not be able to solve them permanently.

The Battle Against The Bottle

This was why the women of Akya had gathered for a meeting braving the December cold. This was to be the first of a series of village meetings to devise a comprehensive community self-help programme for women. The meeting started off in a quiet manner with the discussion centering around the formation of a credit group to be formed with the monthly contributions of the women. But matters came to a head when it came to discussing the results of the reproductive health clinics. Bansi, a woman who had been inveigled into having a hysterectomy by a local quack and was still suffering from health problems, burst out in anger. "You say we have to sleep less with our men but they do not listen. Even if they might agree to forbear on some days, they insist on sex when they are drunk. They beat us up if we refuse. Why don't you talk to the men and make them understand?" Immediately other women also began complaining against their men and it became a verbal free-for-all. No course of action could be decided on that occasion.

In meeting after meeting in other villages thereafter the same refrain was to be heard. Kesarbai of Okhla village said that her husband stayed drunk most of the time and always insisted on having sex whether she wanted it or not. If she refused then he would accuse her of having an affair with some other man behind his back. Another woman said that her husband did not spare her even when she was in a late month of her pregnancy, violating her from behind if she turned away from him. Most women said that refusal would invariably result in physical violence and so they thought it more prudent to give in. Thus it became clear that something would have to be done. The problem was posed to the male members of the Adivasi Shakti Sangathan (ASS), the mass organisation of tribals and dalits in the area which had earlier been formed to address the general issues of exploitation, corruption and lack of access to forests, in whose deliberations and activities both men and women participated.



ANOOP KAMATH

The economy of the area gravitates around the two poles of the market villages of Katkut and Udainagar. These villages are dominated by upper-caste farmers and moneylender-traders who have together exploited the tribals of the area ever since they were settled there by the British. They have been ably assisted in this by the police, forest and revenue department officials. There are police stations and forest ranger offices in these two villages. The tribals, who are either landless or marginal landholders, have to labour in the fields of the upper-caste farmers for less than half the statutory minimum wage or as bonded labourers. The traders extend loans to them at usurious rates of up to 120% annually. The forest officials extort exorbitant bribes from them in order to allow them access to the forests which are legally out of bounds for them. They have benefited very little from what little development and social sector services have been undertaken by the government because of massive corruption in the implementing bureaucracy. The police connive with the upper-caste landlords to frequently register false cases against them so as to keep them permanently cowed down. Similar to the plight of tribals elsewhere in India a half a century of independence had not brought about any improvement in their subaltern status.

Thus it is not surprising that there had been an immediate and massive response as the ASS had begun mass actions. An increasing movement had already started among other tribals in the western Madhya Pradesh region. They had been fighting for their rights for more than fifteen years, attacking the bastions of oppression and demolishing them. The main theme of this modern tribal revival is local self-rule, very eloquently summarised in the slogan "Hamara gaon mein hamara raj" (Our rule in our village).

This movement demands autonomy for the villagers in all spheres of life and the right to delegate as much power as they deem necessary for centralised administration to outside authorities.

The men and women members of the central committee of the ASS sat together to discuss the problem of men's insensitivity towards the feelings and needs of women in a historic meeting in Katkut in April 1997. The excessive consumption of alcohol by the men was pinpointed as the main problem. The men said that changing their attitudes regarding the frequency of having sex when the women did not agree would take time but something could be done to reduce the intake of alcohol and so make the worst of the men more amenable to reason. The proliferation of illegal liquor outlets all over the area had made matters worse in this regard. Previously the men brewed their own liquor from the flowers of the *mahua* (*Madhuca latifolia*) tree, which was a laborious and time consuming task and so could be undertaken only occasionally. With the profuse availability of bottled liquor with a high alcohol content from the two distilleries in the area this constraint had been removed. It was decided to hold a mass public meeting in Okhla village in May in which the campaign to gain access to the forests would be launched and the illegal liquor shop being openly run there would be closed.

The Okhla meeting was a great success. Thousands of people gathered together. The forest officials who had been invited to the meeting to listen to and provide solutions to the problems being faced by the people did not turn up. In their absence it was decided that the people would thenceforward fulfil their subsistence needs from the forest and take care of the forest instead of the forest department. The illegal liquor



shop was surrounded and closed down. The non-tribal owner was forced to leave on the spot with all his stock of liquor. It was decided that a series of such mass actions would be carried out to close the major illegal liquor shops in the area. Village squads consisting of men and women would be formed to take care of the smaller ones.

The lack of access to forests and the spread of alcoholism are both issues that affect women the most. Naturally women have participated with enthusiasm in mass actions around these issues. In Sulgaon village forest officials impounded some buffaloes from the jungle where they were grazing. A posse of women went and forcibly freed the buffaloes from the forest checkpost. Later, in a mass meeting held in Sulgaon in support of this action, one man arrived drunk and began creating a ruckus on the podium. Two women armed with bows and arrows climbed onto the podium and dragged him off by the scruff of his neck. On another occasion in Pandutalay village in Dewas district thousands of women confronted a notorious goon and his henchmen and impounded some two lakh rupees worth of illicit liquor in an

action that has no parallel in the whole of Madhya Pradesh. Such was the power of the anti-liquor movement at that time that even men who had not given up drinking participated wholeheartedly in actions against the sale of illicit liquor.

The ASS felt at this stage that the women should have a separate organisation of their own to address issues specific to themselves. A special meeting was held and an organisation to focus on their own needs called *Kansari nu Vadavno* (KnV) was formed. The name translates as "Felicitation of Kansari". Kansari is the Goddess symbolising the life giving power of the cereal *jowar* (sorghum) which is the staple of the Bhils. Normally the Bhils worship only their male Gods and so by naming their organisation process the "felicitation of a Goddess" symbolising the creative power of nature the women were giving notice to their men and society at large that they would in future fight for establishing their own separate identity.

The Empire Strikes Back

Not unexpectedly all this did not go down well with the exploiting classes

and the government functionaries who have been accustomed to oppressing the tribals. They first tried to intimidate the people by various means to prevent them from joining the organisation. When this did not succeed they fell back on the vintage tactic handed down by the British of using the provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) to crack down on the members of the ASS and KnV. The strong challenge being posed by the tribal mass organisations in western Madhya Pradesh to the destructive development policies of the government and the anti-people nature of the bureaucracy had long been needling both the mainstream politicians and the bureaucrats. To their consternation, in this newer phase, even the tribal women had begun to rebel in strength. So the government decided to decimate these organisations through police repression from August 1997 onwards.

When it comes to acting against mass organisations the police are at their best in concocting and registering false cases under the IPC. Once a case is registered the accused have to go through tortuous, never ending and expensive court proceedings to prove themselves innocent. There are also provisions for the maintenance of public order and tranquillity in both the IPC and the CrPC under which the administration can, through misusing police power, take preventive as well as punitive post-facto action. There is no differentiation in these laws between criminal mass acts or assemblies against public order like rioting and mass actions undertaken for expressing democratic dissent or for making legitimate demands. Often the police themselves use physical force on peaceful demonstrations using these codes and then arraign the demonstrators for having broken

the peace! The CrPC provides for the accused in such cases to be produced before executive rather than judicial magistrates. The power to clamp prohibitory orders is also given to the executive magistrates. Consequently the executive magistrates, acting hand in glove with the police, misuse these arbitrary powers against democratic protests when it suits them.

The police also use an elaborate system of informers to keep a tab on the people. They actively discourage the traditional tribal practice of resolving disputes at the community level and insist that all disputes should be reported to the police. Even if these disputes are not eventually sent to court the police do not fail to take their cut. The police also have professional false witnesses who are used to frame intransigent people. Thus through the threat of imprisonment and dragging Bhils through lengthy and expensive court cases, the administration can discourage them from organising and keep them in their control. The British introduced these laws and the administrative and police setup to keep their empire together and the Indian ruling classes who succeeded them have only too gladly retained them to build and maintain their own home grown empire. As always in the past this time too the empire struck back when threatened with revolt.

Innumerable false cases have been lodged against the members of the ASS and KnV implicating scores of men and women. They have also been prevented by the administration from taking out rallies and holding public meetings to vent their grievances. When massive rallies were planned to be taken out in the towns of Sendhwa and Barwah on November 24th and 25th in 1997 the administration announced it was invoking preventive section 144 of the CrPC preventing the assembly of five or more persons on the whole of

Khargone district. On that occasion all the tribal organisations of western Madhya Pradesh took up the challenge and decided to take out rallies and hold public meetings come what may. A jeep full of men and women going to take part in the rally in Sendhwa were stopped at the dead of night at 2.30 a.m. on November 24, 1997 by the police in Katkut and arrested along with the driver. The jeep was confiscated in a blatantly illegal misuse of the provisions of section 144 CrPC.

The women of the KnV then staged a *dharna* in front of the police outpost in Katkut from November 27th to agitate for the release of those arrested and to protest against the highhandedness of the administration. Immediately the police personnel and the non-tribals began misbehaving with the women by abusing them and calling them all sorts of obscene names. The women continued their *dharna* for the whole day. The Tahsildar, a woman executive magistrate from Barwah, came and warned the Bhil women that if they did not disperse then they might be molested by the non-tribals of Katkut at night and the administration would not intervene. The women retorted that if the non-tribals of Katkut could molest them then they would not be likely to let the Tahsildar go scot-free either. Even though a written complaint regarding this misbehaviour was made to the cell for prevention of atrocities against tribals in Khargone no cognisance was taken of it. Instead two false cases were registered against the women for allegedly having obstructed public servants.

Their Swords Shall Not Rest

Deciding that the only way to counter this nefarious practice of the police of registering false cases was to refuse to be arrested, the accused in all these cases avoided arrest. The police were

thus forced to bring in reinforcements to conduct raids but with little success. Finally the accused members decided to go to court and offer arrest together. On the morning of January 8th 1998 a group of women arrived together at the police outpost at Katkut to be arrested and went to jail shouting slogans, the main one being, *“Sarkar ni jail mein katri jagah baki chhe, dekhne chhe, dekhne chhe”* (We want to see how much space is left in the government’s jails). Instead of meekly taking bail these women had decided to launch a struggle against government apathy and repression by going to jail. The first victory in this struggle was won at the police outpost itself when the police refused to arrest all the women and took only eight into custody. Subsequently one of the women went on a hunger strike in jail saying that she did not find any substance in the guarantees to life and liberty enshrined in the Constitution and so preferred death in jail instead. Finally, after eleven days, the administration agreed to withdraw some of the cases and gave an assurance that the repression against the mass organisations would be stopped and the strike was withdrawn. Repression, however continued unabated.

The non-tribal headmistress of the government tribal girl’s hostel in Katkut had been defalcating the funds meant for the running of the hostel for over a decade. Some of the girl’s parents are members of the KnV and ASS. They decided to prepare a detailed report of the irregularities and sent a complaint to the joint director of the Tribal Department in Khargone. An officer deputed by him came to investigate and made only a perfunctory enquiry. He even warned the complaining students not to make any further complaints. The headmistress took this as a cue to start harassing the girls who had complained. She began to deprive



them of food. The girls then complained to their parents and the latter brought the matter up in meetings of the ASS.

The ASS leaders, knowing that the political and administrative powers were against them, decided to proceed cautiously. They first asked the girls to give a written complaint to the ASS and a copy to the police officer in Katkut. Then they passed a formal resolution in a general body meeting of the Katkut tribal Gram Sabha requesting an enquiry into the running of the hostel. A delegation of men then went to the hostel to enquire and investigate. The delegation members had discussions with the girls as well as the headmistress and submitted a formal report of their findings to the joint director in Khargone. After this the girls decided to take over the management of the hostel themselves with the help of some of the tribal teachers. The money for running the hostel is deposited in a bank account which is jointly operated by two of the senior students. Previously the headmistress used to draw out all the money by forcing students to sign a cheque every month. The girls began

withdrawing the money themselves, managing the hostel activities with this money, and keeping the accounts.

All these years the headmistress had been getting away with her corrupt practices by bribing the higher administrative authorities in Khargone as well as the local politicians. She now turned to these local leaders to get back control of the hostel funds. These leaders saw this as an opportunity to get even with the ASS. They advised the headmistress to lodge a complaint with the police and then they got the police, who were only too eager, to register a case against the people who had gone to investigate the running of the hostel on behalf of the ASS. A false case of having abused and threatened to kill the headmistress was framed under section 506 IPC against five members of the ASS. Then the police began arresting them one by one and sending them to jail. In the process they did not fail to rough up the arrested persons severely. Once again written complaints made to higher authorities were of no avail. Significantly, section 506 is a cognisable and non-bailable offence and does not require any material evidence of a grievous physical hurt

or impounded dangerous substance as do other serious criminal laws. All it requires is a complainant prepared to accuse someone of having threatened to kill her.

When the third person was arrested and beaten up on April 28th 1998 the women of the KnV staged yet another *dharna* in front of the police outpost and prevented the police from taking the arrested person to court unless some responsible officer explained this lawlessness to the people. Even though the Tahsildar and Subdivisional Police Officer did come and assure the women that such illegal actions would not take place in future and that no case would be registered against them for having sat in *dharna* at the police station nevertheless another case was registered against fifteen members of the ASS and KnV of having threatened to kill policemen under the evergreen section 506 IPC.

All the accused immediately went underground in preparation for a long struggle. After much preparation a rally was taken out in Indore on June 1, 1998 by hundreds of women and a memorandum of demands was submitted to the divisional commissioner. The main demands were that the administration take steps to provide proper reproductive health facilities, prevent the sale of illicit liquor and stop its repressive policies. Significantly this was the first mass rally of women in support of reproductive health rights in Madhya Pradesh since the introduction of the target free approach in April 1996.

The Commissioner said that he would conduct an inquiry into the complaints of repression made against the police and only then would he be able to say whether any

action could be taken or not. When asked why he had not done so earlier as these complaints had been continuously made for the last six months he replied that he could not believe that the police officers could possibly be misbehaving with these women and so had thought that the complaints were frivolous. He went to the extent of saying that the tribal bonded labourers who had boycotted working in the fields of the non-tribal landlords for the past month in protest against the non-payment of minimum wages had caused a national loss to the cotton crop that was wasted in the fields.

This continual rejection by the administration of their demands and pleas forced these women to take the drastic step of launching a mass hunger strike. Eighteen Bhil women went on an indefinite hunger strike from June 2, 1998 to press their demands for a more just livelihood and a repression free existence for tribals. Apart from demanding an end to police repression and the withdrawal of false cases lodged

against them, these women also demanded that adequate health services be provided and action be taken against the exploitative practices of the non-tribal people of the area. The strike, the first of its kind by Bhil women, ended on June 10th after receiving an assurance from the National Human Rights Commission that an independent enquiry would be conducted into the complaints of human rights violations made to it by the ASS.

Despite the tremendous repression unleashed by the administration, the Bhil men and women have sustained their organisation and taken it forward. The effectiveness of this mobilisation can be gauged from the fact that the non-tribals of the area have begun lamenting that the tribals do not fear the police anymore and so are going to be impossible to control in the future. In village after village there are strong women who have started speaking out and begun taking community decisions. The women have decided that come what may they shall not rest until a more just familial, social, economic and political order is in place.

The judges in the high courts and in the lower court remain conservative. Despite Public Interest Litigation (PIL) it is still not easy for poor people to approach the Supreme Court. The several enabling acts relating to panchayat raj, bonded labour, minimum wages, excise and the constitutional exhortation to provide education and proper health facilities to women have been disregarded. What is more reprehensible, the administration has used the IPC and the CrPC to try and crush the incipient organisational

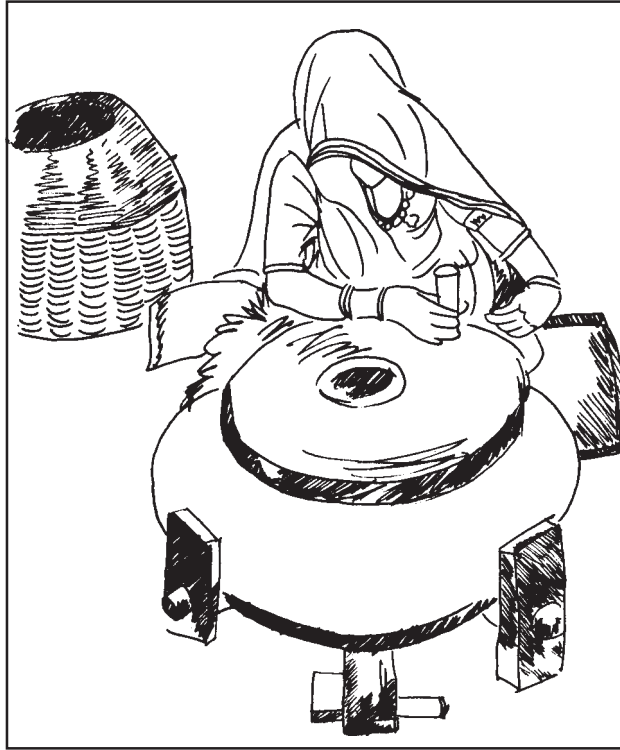


ANOOP KAMATH

process of the people. The National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Women have intervened on behalf of the people but these bodies have very little power to intervene, and are grossly under-staffed and under-financed. On a number of occasions the mass organisations in western Madhya Pradesh have taken the executive to the high and Supreme Courts. The most that has occurred is that they have been verbally reprimanded for their unconstitutional behaviour without being punished in any serious manner. Consequently the executive continues to flout the constitutional

guarantees of fundamental rights as well as the directive principles with impunity.

The thrust of the Constitution is towards a strong central government that is supposedly more equipped to bring about modern industrial development through both state intervention and promotion of private entrepreneurship. This government tramples on the rights of individuals and communities. This is why the more radical provisions in the Constitution for socio-economic justice and local self-government were not made justiciable initially. The brunt of this ostensibly modernising thrust has been borne by the tribals whose homelands have been the most affected by the need to provide water, electricity, minerals and timber for industrial development. Despite there being strong provisions in the Constitution for the protection of tribal land, livelihood and culture, these have been almost totally ignored.



The mass organisations in western Madhya Pradesh have come to the conclusion that the best method, therefore, of opposing the legal system is to adopt the time tested tactic of mass civil disobedience. Disobeying unjust laws, avoiding arrest, not attending court and filling up the jails is the most effective way of defeating the system. Simultaneously a parallel decentralised village-level system of local self rule is being developed. Even though the 73rd Constitutional amendment (Panchayat Raj) has been formally established, its character is no more than that of an appendage to the centralised government that prevails than of an independent challenge to it. Fortunately in article 243-M of the Constitution a provision has been made that tribal areas will not come under the purview of the general act and a special Panchayat Act will have to be passed to allow the tribals to develop systems of local government that accord with tribal specificities. Thus a special local

government system to accord with tribal lifestyle and culture has now become a legal possibility.

The present panchayat system has a provision for one third reservation of seats for women. However, most tribal women functionaries of the panchayats in western Madhya Pradesh are just rubber stamps with their husbands or sons wielding the real power in their names.

There is a fairly progressive women's policy in Madhya Pradesh that categorically states that women will have to organise themselves for their emancipation, a special effort will have to be made

to ensure better health services for them and that their decisions with regard to the sale of alcohol will be treated as paramount. In practice, however, the state has come down hard on the women of the KnV when they began acting in accordance with these policy declarations. Similarly the target free approach has remained confined to seminars and papers with no improvement in reproductive health services at the ground level. The state is prepared to countenance women's empowerment only in theory. Thus the state reverts to its ingrained patriarchal nature when even state sponsored schemes for women's empowerment cross these limits as with the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan and the literacy movement in Andhra Pradesh that gave rise to a massive women's anti-liquor movement

Such is the strength of this patriarchy that sensitive women in positions of power within the government can do little to help. The Secretary to the National

Commission for Women admitted that there was not much that she could do as the government did not act on the Commission's recommendations. Despite a very critical report by the Commission on the way in which the district administration in Khargone was going about repressing the tribal women almost no ameliorative action has been taken by the Madhya Pradesh government. The Secretary of the department of Women and Child Development of the Madhya Pradesh government said that she was only pushing files around without being able to do anything radical to change the lives of poor rural women. She said she had not been able to get time from the Chief Minister for two months to discuss some schemes that she wanted to be implemented for the benefit of women.

The KnV along with the ASS has taken initiatives in the fields of health, education, micro-credit, payment of minimum wages and access to forest resources to build up this kind of a challenge. The most important work undoubtedly has been done in the sphere of control of liquor consumption and sale. The illicit trade in liquor goes on with the connivance of the police which earns massive kickbacks from it. The administration condones this because otherwise the ill paid lower level police staff will not do its bidding when it wants to use them to suppress popular protest. The superintendent of police in Khargone said that the bootleggers had a fundamental right to a livelihood and he would take action against the women if they went about breaking their bottles of liquor. The commissioner in Indore categorically stated that he could not allow the women to take the law into their hands in stopping the sale of illicit liquor because according to him this would lead to chaos. Thus it is quite evident

that by attempting to control the sale of illicit liquor the women have not only improved their position vis-a-vis their men but have also fundamentally challenged the well entrenched structure of the state. No wonder then that the state has struck back in such a vicious manner. The net result has been that women are unable to take action against the sale of liquor as vigorously as previously and the movement has been set back somewhat. Consequently the tight social control over the sale and consumption of liquor has been loosened.

There have been innumerable movements in India for the prohibition of the sale of liquor right from the time of Gandhi. Time and again women have spontaneously taken part with great enthusiasm in anti-liquor movements always to be stymied by the state which has invariably sided with the bootleggers and the distillers. At times there have been legal prohibition in some of the states. These have not succeeded and have had to be withdrawn as most recently in Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. Prohibition is still in place in Gujarat but liquor remains freely available there. Thus there is a need to think out new strategies for anti-liquor movements.

The first thing that has to be realised is that it is impossible to totally stop the consumption and sale of liquor. Not only does a section of the populace always drink but the state also encourages drinking as a source of revenue. At a higher level it is in the interests of the ruling classes that the poor and oppressed should douse their frustrations in alcohol rather than give vent to them through organised mass action. So there will always be supply and consumption of alcohol and it is futile to expect the state to implement prohibition.

A more effective policy will be to establish social control over the consumption and sale of alcohol. This should be done in a decentralised manner in the local community. The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act 1993 as amended in 1997 makes this a distinct possibility. This act has deemed the small tribal hamlet to be the paramount entity in local self government in tribal areas and given it the power to control all social matters through consensual decision-making involving all its adult men and women members aged eighteen years and above. Such social control of alcoholism requires a permanent level of mobilisation of the community. This will ensure that women remain active outside their homes and so are also able to assert their independence within the home.

The new social movements that have come up in the third world have challenged the assumptions of the modernisation paradigm that is today accepted the world over. The leading ideologues of this upsurge from below believe that change will be brought about not by a single monolithic political party but by a worldwide coalition of diverse groups fighting for people's control over resources and local self-rule. The women of KnV are committed to a long drawn out struggle that includes taming chauvinist men and contributing thereby to the worldwide process of liberation. As Karotibai of Katkut emphatically told the Commissioner in Indore, "If you are incapable of providing good government to us poor people then we shall make our own government." □

Rahul and Subhadhra are a husband and wife team working in the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh since 1991-92, helping the Bhil community to organise for their rights.